

The Narcomancer

by N.K. Jemisin

In the land of Gujaareh it was said that trouble came by twos. Four bands of color marked the face of the Dreaming Moon; the great river split into four tributaries; there were four harvests in a year; four humours coursed the inner rivers of living flesh. By contrast, two of anything in nature meant inevitable conflict: stallions in a herd, lions in a pride. Siblings. The sexes.

Gatherer Cet's twin troubles came in the form of two women. The first was a farmcaste woman who had been injured by an angry bull-ox; half her brains had been dashed out beneath its hooves. The Sharers, who could work miracles with the Goddess' healing magic, had given up on her. "We can grow her a new head," said one of the Sharer-elders to Cet, "but we cannot put the memories of her lifetime back in it. Best to claim her dreamblood for others, and send her soul where her mind has already gone."

But when Cet arrived in the Hall of Blessings to see to the woman, he confronted a scene of utter chaos. Three squalling children struggled in the arms of a Sentinel, hampering him as he tried to assist his brethren. Nearer by, a young man fought to get past two of the Sharers, trying to reach a third Templeman — whom, clearly, he blamed for the woman's condition. "You didn't even try!" he shouted, the words barely intelligible through his sobs. "How can my wife live if you won't even try?"

He elbowed one of the Sharers in the chest and nearly got free, but the other flung himself on the distraught husband's back then, half dragging him to the floor. Still the man fought with manic fury, murder in his eyes. None of them noticed Cet until Cet stepped in front of the young man and raised his jungissa stone.

Startled, the young man stopped struggling, his attention caught by the stone. It had been carved into the likeness of a dragonfly; its gleaming black wings blurred as Cet tapped the stone hard with his thumbnail. The resulting sharp whine cut across the cacophony filling the Hall until even the children stopped weeping to look for the source of the noise. As peace returned, Cet willed the stone's vibration to soften to a low, gentle hum. The man sagged as tension drained out of his body, until he hung limp in the two Sharers' arms.

"You know she is already dead," Cet said to the young man. "You know this must be done."

The young man's face tightened in anguish. "No. She breathes. Her heart beats." He slurred the words as if drunk. "No."

"Denying it makes no difference. The pattern of her soul has been lost. If she were healed, you would have to raise her all over again, like one of your children. To make her your wife then would be an abomination."

The man began to weep again, quietly this time. But he no longer fought, and when Cet moved around him to approach his wife, he uttered a little moan and looked away.

Cet knelt beside the cot where the woman lay, and put his fore and middle fingers on her closed eyelids. She was already adrift in the realms between waking and dream; there was no need to use his jungissa to put her to sleep. He followed her into the silent dark and examined her soul, searching for any signs of hope. But the woman's soul was indeed like that of an infant, soft and devoid of all but the most simplistic desires and emotions. The merest press of Cet's will was enough to send her toward the land of dreams, where she would doubtless dissolve into the substance of that realm — or perhaps she would eventually be reborn, to walk the realm of waking anew and regain the experiences she had lost.

Either way, her fate was not for Cet to decide. Having delivered her soul safely, he severed the tether that had bound her to the waking realm, and collected the delicate dreamblood that spilled forth.

The weeping that greeted Cet upon his return to waking was of a different order from before. Turning, Cet saw with satisfaction that the farmcaste man stood with his children now, holding them as they watched the woman's flesh breathe its last. They were still distraught, but the violent madness was gone; in its place was the sort of grief that expressed itself through love and would, eventually, bring healing.

"That was nicely done," said a low voice beside him, and Cet looked up to see the Temple Superior. Belatedly he realized the Superior had been the target of the distraught husband's wrath. Cet had been so focused on the family that he had not noticed.

"You gave them peace without dreamblood," the Superior continued. "Truly, Gatherer Cet, our Goddess favors you."

Cet got to his feet, sighing as the languor of the Gathering faded slowly within him. "The Hall has still been profaned," he said. He looked up at the great shining statue of the Goddess of Dreams, who towered over them with hands outstretched in welcome and eyes shut in the Eternal Dream. "Voices have been raised and violence done, right here at Her feet."

"S-Superior?" A boy appeared at the Superior's shoulder, too young to be an acolyte. One of the Temple's adoptees from the House of Children, probably working a duty-shift as an errand runner. "Are you hurt at all? I saw that man..."

The Superior smiled down at him. "No, child; I'm fine, thank you. Go back to the House before your Teacher misses you."

Looking relieved, the boy departed. The Superior sighed, watching him leave. "Some chaos is to be expected at times like this. The heart is rarely peaceful." He gave Cet a faint smile. "Though, of course, you would not know that, Gatherer."

"I remember the time before I took my oath."

"Not the same."

Cet shrugged, gazing at the mourning family. "I have the peace and order of Temple life to comfort me now. It is enough."

The Superior looked at him oddly for a moment, then sighed. "Well, I'm afraid I must ask you to leave that comfort for a time, Cet. Will you come with me to my office? I have a matter that requires the attention of a Gatherer — one with your unique skill at bestowing peace."

And thus did Cet's second hardship fall upon him.

The quartet that stood in the Superior's office were upriver folk. Cet could see that in their dingy clothing and utter lack of makeup or jewelry; not even the poorest city dweller kept themselves so plain. And no city dweller went unsandaled on the brick-paved streets, which grew painfully hot at midday. Yet the woman who stood at the group's head had the proud carriage of one used to the respect and obedience of others, finery or no finery. The three men all but cowered behind her as the Superior and Cet entered the room.

"Cet, this is Mehepi," said the Superior, gesturing to the woman. "She and her companions are from a

mining village some ways to the south, in the foothills that border the Empty Thousand. Mehepi, I bring you Cet, one of the Temple's Gatherers."

Mehepi's eyes widened in a way that would have amused Cet, had he been capable of amusement. Clearly she had expected something more of Gujaareh's famed Gatherers; someone taller, perhaps. But she recovered quickly and gave him a respectful bow. "I greet you in peace, Gatherer," she said, "though I bring unpeaceful tidings."

Cet inclined his head. "Tidings of—" But he trailed off, surprised, as his eyes caught a slight movement in the afternoon shadows of the room. Some ways apart from Mehepi and the others, a younger woman knelt on a cushion. She was so still — it was her breathing Cet had noticed — that Cet made no wonder he had overlooked her, though now it seemed absurd that he had. Wealthy men had commissioned sculptures with lips less lush, bones less graceful; sugared currants were not as temptingly black as her skin. Though the other upriver folk were staring at Cet, her eyes remained downcast, her body unmoving beneath the faded-indigo drape of her gown. Indigo: the mourning color. Mehepi wore it too.

"What is this?" Cet asked, nodding toward the younger woman.

Was there unease in Mehepi's eyes? Defensiveness, certainly. "We were told the Temple offers its aid only to those who follow the ways of the Dream Goddess," she said. "We have no money to tithe, Gatherer, and none of us has offered dreams or goods in the past year..."

All at once Cet understood. "You brought her as payment."

"No, not payment—" But even without the hint of a stammer in Mehepi's voice, the lie was plain in her manner.

"Explain, then." Cet spoke more sharply than was, perhaps, strictly peaceful. "Why does she sit apart from the rest of you?"

The villagers looked at one another. But before any of them could speak, the young woman said, "Because I am cursed, Gatherer."

The Temple Superior frowned. "Cursed? Is that some upriver superstition?"

Cet had thought the younger woman broken in spirit, to judge by her motionlessness and fixed gaze at the floor. But now she lifted her eyes, and Cet realized that whatever was wrong with her, she was not broken. There was despair in her, strong enough to taste, but something more as well.

"I was a lapis merchant's wife," she said. "When he died, I was taken by the village headman as a secondwife. Now the headman is dead, and they blame me."

"She is barren!" said one of the male villagers. "Two husbands and no children yet? And Mehepi here, she is the firstwife—"

"All of my children had been stillborn," said Mehepi, touching her belly as if remembering the feel of them inside her. That much was truth, as was her pain; some of Cet's irritation with her eased. "That was why my husband took another wife. Then my last child was born alive. The whole village rejoiced! But the next morning, the child stopped breathing. A few days later the brigands came." Her face tightened in anger. "They killed my husband while she slept beside him. And they had their way with her, but even despite that there is no child." Mehepi shook her head. "For so much death to follow one woman, and life itself to shun her? How can it be anything but a curse? That is why..." She darted a look at Cet, then drew herself up. "That is why we thought you might find value in her, Gatherer. Death is your business."

"Death is not a Gatherer's business," Cet said. Did the woman realize how greatly she had insulted him and all his brethren? For the first time in a very long while, he felt anger stir in his heart. "*Peace* is our business. Sharers do that by healing the flesh. Gatherers deal with the soul, judging those which are too corrupt or damaged to be salvaged and granting them the Goddess' blessing—"

"If you had learned your catechisms better you would understand that," the Superior interjected smoothly. He threw Cet a mild look, doubtless to remind Cet that they could not expect better of ignorant country folk. "And you would have known there was no need for payment. In a situation like this, when the peace of many is under threat, it is the Temple's duty to offer aid."

The men looked abashed; Mehepi's jaw tightened at the scolding. With a sigh, the Superior glanced down at some notes he'd taken on a reedleaf sheet. "So, Cet; these brigands she mentioned are the problem. For the past three turns of the greater moon, their village and others along the Empty Thousand have suffered a curious series of attacks. Everyone in the village falls asleep — even the men on guard duty. When they wake, their valuables are gone. Food stores, livestock, the few stones of worth they gather from their mine; their children have been taken too, no doubt sold to those desert tribes who traffic in slaves. Some of the women and youths have been abused, as you heard. And a few, such as the village headman and the guards, were slain outright, perhaps to soften the village's defenses for later. No one wakes during these assaults."

Cet inhaled, all his anger forgotten. "A sleep spell? But only the Temple uses narcomancy."

"Impossible to say," the Superior said. "But given the nature of these attacks, it seems clear we must help. Magic is fought best with magic." He looked at Cet as he spoke.

Cet nodded, suppressing the urge to sigh. It would have been within his rights to suggest that one of his other Gatherer-brethren — perhaps Liyou, the youngest — handle the matter instead. But after all his talk of peace and righteous duty, that would have been hypocritical. And...in spite of himself, his gaze drifted back to the younger woman. She had lowered her eyes once more, her hands folded in her lap. There was nothing peaceful in her stillness.

"We will need a soul-healer," Cet said softly. "There is more to this than abuse of magic."

The Superior sighed. "A Sister, then. I'll write the summons to their Matriarch." The Sisters were an offshoot branch of the faith, coexisting with the Servants of Hananja in an uneasy parallel. Cet knew the Superior had never liked them.

Cet gave him a rueful smile. "Everything for Her peace." He had never liked them either.

They set out that afternoon: the five villagers, two of the Temple's warrior Sentinels, Cet, and a Sister of the Goddess. The Sister, who arrived unescorted at the river docks just as they were ready to push off, was worse than even Cet had expected — tall and commanding, clad in the pale gold robes and veils that signified high rank in their order. That meant this Sister had mastered the most difficult techniques of erotic dreaming, with its attendant power to affect the spirit and the subtler processes of flesh. A formidable creature. But the greatest problem in Cet's eyes was that the Sister was male.

"Did the messenger not explain the situation?" Cet asked the Sister at the first opportunity. He kept his tone light. They rode in a canopied barge more than large enough to hold their entire party and the pole-crew besides. It was not large enough to accommodate ill feelings between himself and the Sister.

The Sister, who had given his name as Ginnem, stretched out along the bench he had claimed for himself.

"Gatherers; so tactful."

Cet resisted the urge to grind his teeth. "You cannot deny that a different Sister — a female Sister — would have been better-suited to deal with this matter."

"Perhaps," Ginnem replied, with a smile that said he thought no one better-suited than himself. "But look." He glanced across the aisle at the villagers, who had occupied a different corner of the barge. The three men sat together on a bench across from the firstwife. Three benches back, the young woman sat alone.

"That one has suffered at the hands of both men and women," Ginnem said. "Do you think my sex makes any difference to her?"

"She was raped by men," Cet said.

"And she is being destroyed by a woman. That firstwife wants her dead, can you not see?" Ginnem shook his head, jingling tiny bells woven into each of his braids. "If not for the need to involve the Temple in the brigand matter, no doubt the firstwife would've found some quiet way to do her in already. And why do you imagine only a woman could know of rape?"

Cet started. "Forgive me. I did not realize—"

"It was long ago." Ginnem shrugged his broad shoulders. "When I was a soldier; another life."

Cet's surprise must have shown on his face, for a moment later Ginnem laughed. "Yes, I was born military caste," he said. "I earned high rank before I felt the calling to the Sisterhood. And I still keep up some of my old habits." He lifted one flowing sleeve to reveal a knife-sheath strapped around his forearm, then flicked it back so quickly that no one but Cet noticed. "So you see, there is more than one reason the Sisterhood sent me."

Cet nodded slowly, still trying and failing to form a clear opinion of Ginnem. Male Sisters were rare; he wondered if all of them were this strange. "Then we are four fighters and not three. Good."

"Oh, don't count me," Ginnem said. "My soldier days are over; I fight only when necessary now. And I expect I'll have my hands full with other duties." He glanced at the young woman again, sobering. "Someone should talk to her."

And he turned his kohl-lined eyes to Cet.

Night had fallen, humid and thick, by the time Cet went to the woman. Her companions were already abed, motionless on pallets the crew had laid on deck. One of the Sentinels was asleep; the other stood at the prow with the ship's watchman.

The woman still sat on her bench. Cet watched her for a time, wondering if the lapping water and steadily passing palm trees had lulled her to sleep, but then she lifted a hand to brush away a persistent moth. Throwing a glance at Ginnem — who was snoring faintly on his bench — Cet rose and went to sit across from the woman. Her eyes were lost in some waking dream until he sat down, but they sharpened very quickly.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Namsut." Her voice was low and warm, touched with some southlands accent.

"I am Cet," he replied.

"Gatherer Cet."

"Does my title trouble you?"

She shook her head. "You bring comfort to those who suffer. That takes a kind heart."

Surprised, Cet smiled. "Few even among the Goddess's most devout followers see anything other than the death I bring. Fewer still have ever called me kind for it. Thank you."

She shook her head, looking into the passing water. "No one who has known suffering would think ill of you, Gatherer."

Widowed twice, raped, shunned. He tried to imagine her pain and could not. That inability troubled him, all of a sudden.

"I will find the brigands who hurt you," he said, to cover his discomfort. "I will see that their corruption is excised from the world."

To his surprise, her eyes went hard as iron though she kept her voice soft. "They did nothing to me that two husbands had not already done," she said. "And wife-brokers before that, and my father's creditors before that. Will you hunt down all of them?" She shook her head. "Kill the brigands, but not for me."

This was not at all the response that Cet had expected. So confused was he that he blurted the first question that came to his mind. "What shall I do for you, then?"

Namsut's smile threw him even further. It was not bitter, that smile, but neither was it gentle. It was a smile of anger, he realized at last. Pure, politely restrained, tooth-grinding rage.

"Give me a child," she said.

In the morning, Cet spoke of the woman's request to Ginnem.

"In the upriver towns, the headman's wife rules if the headman dies," Cet explained as they broke their fast. "That is tradition, according to Namsut. But a village head must prove him or herself favored by the gods, to rule. Namsut says fertility is one method of proof."

Ginnem frowned, chewing thoughtfully on a date. A group of women on the passing shore were doing laundry at the riverside, singing a rhythmic song while they worked. "That explains a great deal," he said at last. "Mehepi has proven herself at least able to conceive, but after so many dead children the village must be wondering if she too is cursed. And since having a priest for a lover might also connote the gods' favor, I know now why Mehepi has been eying me with such speculation."

Cet started, feeling his cheeks heat. "You think she wants—" He took a date to cover his discomfort. "From you?"

Ginnem grinned. "And why not? Am I not fine?" He made a show of tossing his hair, setting all the tiny bells a-tinkle.

"You know full well what I mean," Cet said, glancing about in embarrassment. Some of the other passengers looked their way at the sound of Ginnem's hair-bells, but no one was close enough to overhear.

"Yes, and it saddens me to see how much it troubles you," Ginnem said, abruptly serious. "Sex, Gatherer Cet. That is the word you cannot bring yourself to say, isn't it?" When Cet said nothing, Ginnem made an annoyed sound. "Well, I will not let you avoid it, however much you and your stiffnecked Servant brethren disapprove. I am a Sister of the Goddess. I use narcomancy — and yes, my body when necessary — to heal those wounded spirits that can be healed. It is no less holy a task than what you do for those who cannot be healed, Gatherer, save that my petitioners do not die when I'm done!"

He was right. Cet bent at the waist, his eyes downcast, to signal his contrition. The gesture seemed to mollify Ginnem, who sighed.

"And no, Mehepi has not approached me," Ginnem said, "though she's hardly had time, with three such devoted attendants..." Abruptly he caught his breath. "Ahh — yes, *now* I understand. I first thought this was a simple matter of a powerful senior wife plotting against a weaker secondwife. But more than that — this is a race. Whichever woman produces a healthy child first will rule the village."

Cet frowned, glancing over at the young woman again. She had finally allowed herself to sleep, leaning against one of the canopy-pillars and drawing her feet up onto the bench. Only in sleep was her face peaceful, Cet noticed. It made her even more beautiful, though he'd hardly imagined that possible.

"The contest is uneven," he said. He glanced over at the headwoman Mehepi — acting headwoman, he realized now, by virtue solely of her seniority. She was still asleep on one of the pallets, comfortable between two of her men. "Three lovers to none."

"Yes." Ginnem's lip curled. "That curse business was a handy bit of cleverness on Mehepi's part. No man will touch the secondwife for fear of sharing the curse."

"It seems wrong," Cet said softly, gazing at Namsut. "That she should have to endure yet another man's lust to survive."

"You grew up in the city, didn't you?" When Cet nodded, Ginnem said, "Yes, I thought so. My birth-village was closer to the city, and surely more fortunate than these people's, but some customs are the same in every backwater. Children are wealth out here, you see — another miner, another strong back on the farm, another eye to watch for enemies. A woman is honored for the children she produces, and so she should be. But make no mistake, Gatherer: this contest is for power. The secondwife could leave that village. She could have asked asylum of your Temple Superior. She returns to the village by choice."

Cet frowned, mulling over that interpretation for a moment. It did not feel right.

"My father was a horse-trader," he said. Ginnem raised an eyebrow at the apparent non-sequitur; Cet gave him a faint shrug of apology. "Not a very good one. He took poor care of his animals, trying to squeeze every drop of profit from their hides."

Even after so many years it shamed Cet to speak of his father, for anyone who listened could guess what his childhood had been like. A man so neglectful of his livelihood was unlikely to be particularly careful of his heirs. He saw this realization dawn on Ginnem's face, but to Cet's relief Ginnem merely nodded for Cet to continue.

"Once, my father sold a horse — a sickly, half-starved creature — to a man so known for his cruelty that no other trader in the city would serve him. But before the man could saddle the horse, it gave a great neigh and leapt into the river. It could have swum back to shore, but that would have meant recapture. So it swam in the opposite direction, deeper into the river, where finally the current carried it away."

Ginnem gave Cet a skeptical look. "You think the secondwife *wants* the village to kill her?"

Cet shook his head. "The horse was not dead. When last I saw it, it was swimming with the current, its head above the water, facing whatever fate awaited it downriver. Most likely it drowned or was eaten by predators. But what if it survived the journey, and even now runs free over some faraway pasture? Would that not be a reward worth so much risk?"

"Ah. All or nothing; win a better life or die trying." Ginnem's eyes narrowed as he gazed contemplatively at Cet. "You understand the secondwife well, I see."

Cet drew back, abruptly unnerved by the way Ginnem was looking at him. "I respect her."

"You find her beautiful?"

He said it with as much dignity as he could: "I am not blind."

Ginnem looked Cet up and down in a way that reminded Cet uncomfortably of his father's customers. "You are fine enough," Ginnem said, with more than a hint of lasciviousness in his tone. "Handsome, healthy, intelligent. A tad short, but that's no great matter if she does not mind a small child — "

"A Gatherer belongs wholly to the Goddess'," Cet said, leaning close so that the disapproval in his voice would not be heard by the others. "That is the oath I swore when I chose this path. The celibacy — "

"Comes second to your primary mission, Gatherer," Ginnem said in an equally stern voice. "It is the duty of any priest of the Goddess of Dreams to bring peace. There are two ways we might create peace in this village, once we've dealt with the brigands. One is to let Mehepi goad the villagefolk into killing or exiling the secondwife. The other is to give the secondwife a chance to control her own life for the first time. Which do you choose?"

"There are other choices," Cet muttered, uneasily. "There must be."

Ginnem shrugged. "If she has any talent for dreaming, she could join my order. But I see no sign of the calling in her."

"You could still suggest it to her."

"Mmm." Ginnem's tone was noncommittal. He turned to gaze at Namsut. "That horse you spoke of. If you could have helped it on its way, would you have? Even if that earned you the wrath of the horse's owner and your father?"

Cet flinched back, too startled and flustered to speak. Ginnem's eyes slid back to him.

"How did the horse break free, Cet?"

Cet set his jaw. "I should rest while I can. The rest of the journey will be long."

"Dream well," Ginnem said. Cet turned away and lay down, but he felt Ginnem's eyes on him for a long while afterward.

When Cet slept, he dreamt of Namsut.

The land of dreams was as infinite as the mind of the Goddess who contained it. Though every soul traveled there during sleep, it was rare for two to meet. Most often, the people encountered in dreams

were phantoms — conjurations of the dreamer's own mind, no more real than the palm trees and placid oasis which manifested around Cet's dreamform now. But real or not, there sat Namsut on a boulder overlooking the water, her indigo veils wafting in the hot desert wind.

"I wish I could be you," she said, not turning from the water. Her voice was a whisper; her mouth never moved. "So strong, so serene, the kind-hearted killer. Do your victims feel what you feel?"

"You do not desire or require death," Cet said.

"True. I'm a fool for it, but I want to live." Her image blurred for a moment, superimposed by that of a long-legged girlchild with the same despairing, angry eyes. "I was nine when a man first took me. My parents were so angry, so ashamed. I made them feel helpless. I should have died then."

"No," Cet said quietly. "Others' sins are no fault of yours."

"I know that." Abruptly something large and dark turned a lazy loop under the water — a manifestation of her anger, since oases did not have fish. But like her anger, the monster never broke the surface. Cet found this at once fascinating and disturbing.

"The magic that I use," he said. "Do you know how it works?"

"Dreamichor from nonsense-dreams," she said. "Dreamseed from wet dreams, dreambile from nightmares, dreamblood from the last dream before death. The four humours of the soul."

He nodded. "Dreamblood is what Gatherers collect. It has the power to erase pain and quiet emotions." He stepped closer then, though he did not touch her. "If your heart is pained, I can share dreamblood with you now."

She shook her head. "I do not want my pain erased. It makes me strong." She turned to look up at him. "Will you give me a child, Gatherer?"

He sighed, and the sky overhead seemed to dim. "It is not our way. The Sister...dreamseed is his specialty. Perhaps..."

"Ginnem does not have your kind eyes. Nor do your Sentinel brethren. You, Gatherer Cet. If I must bear a child, I want yours."

Clouds began to race across the desert sky, some as tormented abstractions, some forming blatantly erotic shapes. Cet closed his eyes against the shiver that moved along his spine. "It is not our way," he said again, but there was a waver in his voice that he could not quite conceal.

He heard the smile in her voice just as keenly. "These are your magic-quieted emotions, Gatherer? They seem loud enough."

He forced his mind away from thoughts of her, lest they disturb his inner peace any further. What was wrong with him? By sheer will he stilled the unrest in his heart, and gratifyingly the sky was clear again when he opened his eyes.

"Forgive me," he murmured.

"I will not. It comforts me to know that you are still capable of feeling. You should not hide it; people would fear Gatherers less if they knew." She looked thoughtful. "Why do you hide it?"

Cet sighed. "Even the Goddess' magic cannot quiet a Gatherer's emotions forever. After many years, the

feelings inevitably break free — and they are very powerful then. Sometimes dangerous." He shifted, uncomfortable on many levels. "As you said, we frighten people enough as it is."

She nodded, then abruptly rose and turned to him. "There are no other choices," she said. "I have no desire to serve the Goddess as a Sister. There is none of Her peace in my heart, and there may never be. But I mean to live, Gatherer — *truly* live, as more than a man's plaything or a woman's scapegoat. I want this for my children as well. So I ask you again: will you help me?"

She was a phantom. Cet knew that now, for she could not have known of his conversation with Ginnem otherwise. He was talking to himself, or to some aspect of the Goddess come to reflect his own folly back at him. Yet he felt compelled to answer. "I cannot."

The dreamscape transformed, becoming the inside of a room. A gauze-draped low bed, wide enough for two, lay behind Namsut.

She glanced at it, then at him. "But you want to."

That afternoon they disembarked at a large trading-town. There Cet used Temple funds to purchase horses and supplies for the rest of the trip. The village, said Mehepi, was on the far side of the foothills, beyond the verdant floodplain that made up the richest part of Gujaareh. It would take at least another day's travel to get there.

They set out as soon as the horses were loaded, making good time along an irrigation road which ran flat through miles of barley, hekeh, and silvercape fields. As sunset approached they entered the low, arid foothills, Gujaareh's last line of defense against the ever-encroaching desert beyond. Here Cet called a halt. The villagers were nervous, for the hills were the brigands' territory, but with night's chill already setting in and the horses weary, there was little choice. The Sentinels split the watch while the rest of them tended their mounts and made an uneasy camp.

Cet had only just settled near a large boulder when he saw Ginnem crouched beside Namsut's pallet. Ginnem's hands were under her blanket, moving over her midsection in some slow rhythmic dance. Namsut's face had turned away from Cet, but he heard her gasp clearly enough, and saw Ginnem's smile.

Rage blotted out thought. For several breaths Cet was paralyzed by it, torn between shock, confusion, and a mad desire to walk across camp and beat Ginnem bloody.

But then Ginnem frowned and glanced his way, and the anger shattered.

Goddess... Shivering with more than the night's chill, Cet lifted his eyes to the great multihued face of the Dreaming Moon. What had that been? Now that the madness had passed, he could taste magic in the air: the delicate salt-and-metal of dreamseed. Ginnem had been healing the girl, nothing more. But even if Ginnem had been pleasuring her, what did it matter? Cet was a Gatherer. He had pledged himself to a goddess, and goddesses did not share.

A few moments later he heard footsteps and felt someone settle beside him. "Are you all right, Gatherer Cet?" Ginnem.

Cet closed his eyes. The Moon's afterimage burned against his eyelids in tilted stripes: red for blood, white for seed, yellow for ichor, black for bile.

"I do not know," he whispered.

"Well." Ginnem kept his voice light, but Cet heard the serious note underneath it. "I know jealousy when I sense it, and shock and horror too. Dreamseed is more fragile than the other humours; your rage tore my spell like a rock through spidersilk."

Horrified, Cet looked from him to Namsut. "I'm sorry. I did not mean — is she—"

"She is undamaged, Gatherer. I was done by the time you wanted to throttle me. What concerns me more is that you wanted to throttle me at all." He glanced sidelong at Cet.

"Something is...wrong with me." But Cet dared not say what that might be. Had it been happening all along? He thought back and remembered his anger at Mehepi, the layers of unease that Namsut stirred in him. Yes. Those had been the warnings.

Not yet, he prayed to Her. Not yet. It is too soon.

Ginnem nodded and fell silent for a while. Finally he said, very softly, "If I could give Namsut what she wants, I would. But though those parts of me still function in the simplest sense, I have already lost the ability to father a child. In time, I will only give pleasure through dreams."

Cet started. The Sisters were a secretive lot — as were Cet's own fellow Servants, of course — but he had never known what price they paid for their magic. Then he realized Ginnem's confession had been an offering. Trust for trust.

"It... begins slowly with us," Cet admitted, forcing out the words. It was a Gatherer's greatest secret, and greatest shame. "First surging emotions, then dreaming awake, and finally we — we lose all peace, and go mad. There is no cure, once the process begins. If it has begun for me..." He trailed off. It was too much, on top of everything else. He could not bear the thought. He was not ready.

Ginnem put a hand on his shoulder in silent compassion. When Cet said nothing more, Ginnem got to his feet. "I will help all I can."

This made Cet frown. Ginnem chuckled and shook his belled head. "I am a healer, Gatherer, whatever you might think of my bedroom habits — "

He paused suddenly, his smile fading. A breath later Cet felt it too: an intense, sudden desire to sleep. With it came the thin, unmistakable whine of a jungissa stone, wafting through the camp like a poisoned breeze.

One of the Sentinels cried an alarm. Cet scrambled to his feet, fumbling for his ornaments. Ginnem dropped to his knees and began chanting something, his hands held outward as if pushing against some invisible force. The Sentinels had gone back to back in the shadow of a boulder, working some kind of complicated dance with their knives to aid their concentration against the spell. Mehepi and one of the men were already asleep; as Cet looked around for the source of the spell, the other two men fell to the ground. Namsut made a sound like pain and stumbled toward Cet and Ginnem. Her eyes were heavy and dull, Cet saw, her legs shaking as if she walked under a great weight, but she was awake. She fought the magic with an almost visible determination.

He felt fear and longing as he gazed at her, a leviathan rising beneath the formerly-placid waters of his soul.

So he snatched forth his own jungissa and struck it with a fingernail. Its deeper, clearer song rang across the hills, cutting across the atonal waver of the narcomancer's stone. Folding his will around the shape of the vibrations, Cet closed his eyes and flung forth the only possible counter to the narcomancer's

sleep-spell: one of his own.

The Sentinels dropped, their knives clattering on the rocky soil. Namsut moaned and collapsed, a dark blur among the Moonlit stones. Ginnem caught his breath. "Cet, what...are you..." Then he, too, sagged.

There was a clatter of stones from a nearby hill as the narcomancer's jungissa-song faltered. Cet caught a glimpse of several dark forms moving among the stones there, some dragging others who had fallen, and abruptly the narcomancer's jungissa began to fade as with distance. They were running away.

Cet kept his jungissa humming until the last of the terrible urge to sleep had passed. Then he sagged onto a saddle and thanked the Goddess, over and over again.

"A jungissa," Cet said. "No doubt."

It was morning. The group sat around a fire eating travel-food and drinking bitter, strong coffee, for none of them had slept well once Cet awakened them from the spell.

The villagers looked at each other and shook their heads at Cet's statement, uncomprehending. The Sentinels looked grim. "I suspected as much," Ginnem said with a sigh. "Nothing else has that sound."

For the villagers, Cet plucked his own jungissa stone from the belt of his loinskirt and held it out for them to see. It sat in his hand, a delicately-carved dragonfly in polished blue-black. He tapped it with his thumbnail, and they all winced as it shivered and sent forth its characteristic whine.

"The jungissa itself has no power," Cet said to reassure them. He willed the stone silent; it went instantly still. "It amplifies magic only for those who have been trained in narcomantic techniques. This jungissa is the child of a stone which fell from the sky many centuries ago. There are only fifteen other ornaments like it in all the world. Three have cracked or broken over time. One was given to the House of the Sisters; one is used by the Temple for training and healing purposes; but only I and my three brother-Gatherers carry and use the stones on a regular basis. The remainder of the stones are kept in the Temple vault under guard." He sighed. "And yet, somehow, these brigands have one."

Ginnem frowned. "I saw the Sisters' queen-bee stone in our House just before I left for this journey. Could someone have stolen a stone from the Temple?"

One of the Sentinels drew himself up at that, scowling in affront. "No one could get past my brothers and me to do so."

"You said these stones fall from the sky?" asked Namsut. She looked thoughtful. "There was sun's seed in the sky a few months ago, on the night of the Ze-kaari celebration. I saw many streaks cross the stars; there was a new Moon that night. Most faded to nothing, but one came very near, and there was light in the hills where it fell."

"Another jungissa?" It was almost too astounding and horrible to contemplate — another of the Goddess' gifts, lying unhallowed in a pit somewhere and pawed over by ruffians? Cet shuddered. "But even if they found such a thing, the rough stone itself would be useless. It must be carved to produce a sound. And it takes years of training to use that sound."

"What difference does any of that make?" Ginnem asked, scowling. "They have one and they've used it. We must capture them and take it."

Military thinking; Cet almost smiled. But he nodded agreement.

"How did you see sun's seed?" Mehepi demanded suddenly of Namsut. "Our husband had you with him that night — or so I believed 'til now. Did you slip out to meet some other lover?"

Namsut smiled another of her polite, angry smiles. "I often went outside after a night with him. The fresh air settled my stomach."

Mehepi caught her breath in affront, then spat on the ground at Namsut's feet. "Nightmare-spawned demoness! Why our husband married a woman so full of hate and death, I will never understand!"

Ginnem threw a stern look at Mehepi. "Your behavior is offensive to our Goddess, headwoman."

Mehepi looked sullen for a moment, but then mumbled an apology. No hint of anger showed on Namsut's face as she inclined her head first to Ginnem, then to Mehepi. That done, she rose, brushed off her gown, and walked away.

But Cet had seen something which made him frown. Nodding to the others to excuse himself, he rose and trotted after her. Though Namsut must have heard him, she kept walking, and only when he caught her in the lee of the hill did she turn to face him.

He took her hands and turned them over. Across each of the palms was a row of dark crusted crescents.

"So that was how you fought the spell," he said.

Namsut's face was as blank as a stone. "I told you, Gatherer. Pain makes me strong."

He almost flinched, for that conversation had taken place in dreaming. But within the mind of the Goddess everything was possible, and desires often called forth the unexpected.

To encourage that desire was dangerous. Yet the compulsion to brush a thumb across her small wounds was irresistible, as was the compulsion to do something about them. Namsut's eyelids fluttered as Cet willed her into a waking dream. In it she looked down to see that her hands were whole. When he released the dream, she blinked, then looked down. Cet rubbed away the lingering smears of dried blood with his thumb; the wounds were gone.

"A simple healing is within any Servant's skill," he said softly. "And it is a Gatherer's duty to fight pain."

Her lips thinned. "Yes, I had forgotten. Pain makes me strong, and you will do nothing that actually helps me. I thank you, Gatherer, but I must wash before we begin the day's travels."

She pulled away before he could think of a reply, and as he watched her leave he wondered how a Gatherer could fight pain in himself.

By afternoon the next day they reached their destination. According to Mehepi, the brigands had attacked the village repeatedly to claim the mined lapis-stones, and the result was devastation on a scale that Cet had never seen. They passed an empty standing granary and bare fields. Several of the village's houses were burned-out shells; the eyes and cheeks of the people they saw were nearly as hollow. Cet could not imagine why anyone would vie to rule such a place.

Yet here he saw for the first time that not all the village was arrayed against Namsut. Two young girls with warm smiles came out to tend her horse when she dismounted. A toothless old man hugged her tightly, and threw an ugly glare at Mehepi's back. "That is the way of things in a small community like this one," Ginnem murmured, following Cet's gaze. "Often it takes only a slight majority — or an especially

hateful minority — to make life a nightmare for those in disfavor."

Here Mehepi took over, leading them to the largest house in the village, built of sun-baked brick like the rest, but two stories high. "See to our guests," she ordered Namsut, and without a word Namsut did as she was told. She led Cet, Ginnem, and the two Sentinels into the house.

"Mehepi's room," Namsut said as they passed a room which bore a handsome wide bed. It had probably been the headman's before his death. "My room." To no one's surprise her room was the smallest in the house. But to Cet's shock he saw that her bed was low and gauze-draped — the same bed he'd seen in his dream.

A true-seeing: a dream of the future sent by the Goddess. He had never been so blessed, or so confused, in his life.

He distracted himself by concentrating on the matter at hand. "Stay nearby," he told the Sentinels as they settled into the house's two guest-rooms. "If the brigands attack again, I'll need to be able to wake you." They nodded, looking sour; neither had forgiven Cet for putting them to sleep before.

"And I?" asked Ginnem. "I can create a kind of shield around myself and anyone near me. Though I won't be able to hold it if you fling a sleep spell at my back again."

"I'll try not to," Cet said. "If my narcomancy is overwhelmed, your shield may be our only protection."

That evening the villagefolk threw them a feast, though a paltry one. One of the elders drew out a battered double-flute, and with a child clapping a menat for rhythm they had weak, off-key entertainment. The food was worse: boiled grain porridge, a few vegetables, and roasted horsemeat. Cet had made a gift of the horses to Mehepi and her men, and they'd promptly butchered one of them. It was likely the first meat the village had seen in months.

"Stopping the brigands will not save this place," Ginnem muttered under his breath. He was grimly chewing his way through the bland porridge, as were all of them. To refuse the food would have been an insult. "They are too poor to survive."

"The mine here produces lapis, I heard," one of the Sentinels said. "That's valuable."

"The veins are all but depleted," said the other. "I talked to one of the elders awhile this afternoon. They have not mined good stone here in years. Even the nodes the brigands take are poor quality. With new tools and more men they might dig deeper, find a new vein, but..." He looked about the room and sighed.

"We must ask the Temple Superior to send aid," Ginnem said.

Cet said nothing. The Temple had already given the villagers a phenomenal amount of aid just by sending a Gatherer and two Sentinels; he doubted the Superior would be willing to send more. More likely the village would have to dissolve, its people relocating to other settlements to survive. Without money or status in those places, they would be little better than slaves.

Almost against his will, Cet looked across the feast-table at Namsut, who sat beside Mehepi. She had eaten little, her eyes wandering from face to face around the table, seemingly as troubled by the sorry state of her village as the Templefolk. When her eyes fell on Cet, she frowned in wary puzzlement. Flustered, Cet looked away.

To find Ginnem watching him with a strange, sober look. "So, not just jealousy."

Cet lowered his eyes. "No. No doubt it is the start of the madness."

"A kind of madness, yes. Maybe just as dangerous in its own way, for you."

"What are you talking about?"

"Love," Ginnem said. "I'd hoped it was only lust, but clearly you care about her."

Cet set his plate down, his appetite gone. Love? He barely knew Namsut. And yet the image of her fighting the sleep spell danced through his mind over and over, a recurring dream that he had no power to banish. And yet the thought of leaving her to her empty fate filled him with anguish.

Ginnem winced, then sighed. "Everything for Her peace."

"What?"

"Nothing." Ginnem did not meet Cet's eyes. "But if you mean to help her, do it tomorrow, or the day after. That will be the best time."

The words sent a not-entirely-unpleasant chill along Cet's spine. "You've healed her?"

"She needed no healing. She's as fertile as river soil. I can only assume she hasn't conceived yet because the Goddess wanted her child fathered by a man of her choosing. A blessing, not a curse."

Cet looked down at his hands, which trembled in his lap. How could a blessing cause him such turmoil? He wanted Namsut; that he could no longer deny. Yet being with her meant violating his oath. He had never questioned that oath in the sixteen years of his service as a Gatherer. For his faithfulness he had been rewarded with a life of such peace and fulfillment as most people could only imagine. But now that peace was gone, ground away between the twin inexorabilities of duty and desire.

"What shall I do?" he whispered. But if the Sister heard him, he made no reply.

And when Cet looked up, a shadow of regret was in Namsut's eyes.

Ginnem and the Sentinels, who had some ability to protect themselves against narcomancy, took the watch, with Ginnem to remain in the house in case of attack. Exhausted from the previous night's battle and the day's travels, Cet went to sleep in the guestroom as soon as the feast ended. It came as no great surprise that his hours in the land of dreams were filled with faceless phantoms who taunted him with angry smiles and inviting caresses. And among them, the cruelest phantom of all: a currant-skinned girlchild with Cet's kind eyes.

When he woke just as the sky began to lighten with dawn, he missed the sound of the jungissa, so distracted was he by his own misery. The urge to sleep again seemed so natural, dark and early as it was, that he did not fight it. Perhaps if he slept again, his dreams would be more peaceful.

"Gatherer!"

Perhaps if he slept again...

A foot kicked Cet hard in his side. He cried out and rolled to a crouch, disoriented. Ginnem sat nearby, his hands raised in that defensive gesture again, his face tight with concentration. Only then did Cet notice the high, discordant whine of the narcomancer's jungissa, startlingly loud and nearby.

"The window," Ginnem gritted through his teeth. The narcomancer was right outside the house.

There was a sudden scramble of footsteps outside. The window was too small for egress, so Cet ran through the house, bursting out of the front door just as a fleet shadow ran past. In that same instant Cet passed beyond range of Ginnem's protective magic, and stumbled as the urge to sleep came down heavy as stones. Lifting his legs was like running through mud; he groaned in near pain from the effort. He was dreaming awake when he reached for his own jungissa. But he was a Gatherer and dreams were his domain, so he willed his dream-self to strike the ornament against the doorsill, and it was his waking hand that obeyed.

The pure reverberation of the dragonfly jungissa cleared the lethargy from his mind, and his own heart supplied the righteous fury to replace it. Shaping that fury into a lance of vibration and power, Cet sent it at the fleeing figure's back with all the imperative he could muster. The figure stumbled, and in that instant Cet caught hold of the narcomancer's soul.

There was no resistance as Cet dragged him into dream; whatever training the brigands' narcomancer had, it went no further than sleep-spells. So they fell, blurring through the land of dreams until their shared minds snagged on a commonality. The Temple appeared around them as a skewed, too-large version of the Hall of Blessings, with a monstrous statue of the Dream Goddess looming over all. The narcomancer cried out and fell to his knees at the sight of the statue, and Cet took the measure of his enemy at last.

He was surprised to see how young the man was — twenty at the most, thin and ragged with hair in a half-matted mix of braids and knots. Even in the dream he stank of months unwashed. But despite the filth, it was the narcomancer's awe of the statue which revealed the truth.

"You were raised in the Temple," Cet said.

The narcomancer crossed his arms over his breast and bent his head to the statue. "Yes, yes."

"You were trained?"

"No. But I saw how the magic was done."

And he had taught himself, just from that? But the rest of the youth's tale was easy enough to guess. The Temple raised orphans and other promising youngsters in its House of Children. At the age of twelve those children chose whether to pursue one of the paths to service, or leave for a life among the laity. Most of the latter did well, for the Temple found apprenticeships or other vocations for them, but there were always a few who suffered from mistakes or misfortune and ended badly.

"Why?" Cet asked. "You were raised to serve peace. How could you turn your back on the Goddess' ways?"

"The brigands," whispered the youth. "They stole me from my farm, used me, beat me. I, I tried to run away. They caught me, but not before I'd found the holy stone, taken a piece for myself. They said I wasn't worthy to be one of them. I showed them, showed them. I showed them I could make the stone work. I didn't want to hurt anyone but it had been so long! So long. It felt so good to be strong again."

Cet cupped his hands around the young man's face. "And look what you have become. Are you proud?"

"...No."

"Where did you find the jungissa?"

The dreamscape blurred in response to the youth's desire. Cet allowed this, admiring the magic in spite of himself. The boy was no true narcomancer, not half-trained and half-mad as he was, but what a Gatherer he could have been! The dream re-formed into an encampment among the hills: the brigands, settled in

for the night, eighteen or twenty snoring lumps that had caused so much suffering. Through the shared underpinnings of the dream Cet understood at once where to find them. Then the dream flew over the hills to a rocky basin. On its upper cliff-face was an outcropping shaped like a bird of prey's beak. In a black-burned scar beneath this lay a small, pitted lump of stone.

"Thank you," Cet said. Taking control of the dream, he carried them from the hills to a greener dreamscape. They stood near the delta of a great river, beyond which lay an endless sea. The sky stretched overhead in shades of blue, some lapis and some as deep as Namsut's mourning gown. In the distance a small town shone like a gemstone amid the carpet of green. Cet imagined it full of people who would welcome the youth when they met him.

"Your soul will find peace here," Cet said.

The youth stared out over the dreamscape, lifting a hand as if the beauty hurt his eyes. When he looked at Cet he was weeping. "Must I die now?"

Cet nodded, and after a moment the youth sighed.

"I never meant to hurt anyone," he said. "I just wanted to be free."

"I understand," Cet said. "But your freedom came at the cost of others' suffering. That is corruption, unacceptable under the Goddess' law."

The narcomancer bowed his head. "I know. I'm sorry."

Cet smiled and passed a hand over the youth's head. The grime and reek vanished, his appearance becoming wholesome at last. "Then She will welcome your return to the path of peace."

"Thank you," said the youth.

"Thank Her," Cet replied. He withdrew from the dream then, severing the tether and collecting the dreamblood. Back in waking, the boy's body released one last breath and went still. As shouts rang out around the village, Cet knelt beside the body and arranged its limbs for dignity.

Ginnem and one of the Sentinels ran up. "Is it done?" the Sentinel asked.

"It is," Cet said. He lifted the jungissa stone he'd taken from the boy's hand. It was a heavy, irregular lump, its surface jagged and cracked. Amazing the thing had worked at all.

"And are you well?" That was Ginnem. Cet looked at the Sister and understood then that the question had nothing to do with Cet's physical health.

So Cet smiled to let Ginnem see the truth. "I am very well, Sister Ginnem."

Ginnem blinked in surprise, but nodded.

More of the villagers arrived. One of them was Namsut, breathless, with a knife in one hand. Cet admired her for a moment, then bowed his head to the Goddess' will.

"Everything for Her peace," he said.

The Sentinels went into the hills with some of the armed village men, after Cet told them where the brigands could be found. He also told the villagefolk where they could find the parent-stone of the

narcomancer's jungissa.

"A basin marked by a bird's beak. I know the place," said Mehepi with a frown. "We'll go destroy the thing."

"No," Namsut said. Mehepi glared at her, but Namsut met her eyes. "We must fetch it back here. That kind of power is always valuable to someone, somewhere."

Cet nodded. "The Temple would indeed pay well for the stone and any pieces of it."

This set the villagers a-murmur, their voices full of wonder and, for the first time since Cet had met them, hope. He left them to their speculations and returned to the guestroom of the headman's house, where he settled himself against a wall and gazed through the window at passing clouds. Presently, as he had known she would, Namsut came to find him.

"Thank you," she said. "You have saved us in more ways than one."

He smiled. "I am only Her servant."

She hesitated and then said, "I...I should not have asked you for what I did. It seemed a simple matter to me, but I see how it troubles you."

He shook his head. "No, you were right to ask it. I had forgotten: my duty is to alleviate suffering by any means at my disposal." His oath would have become meaningless if he had failed to remember that. Ginnem had been right to remind him.

It took her a moment to absorb his words. She stepped forward, her body tense. "Then you will do it? You will give me a child?"

He gazed at her for a long while, memorizing her face. "You understand that I cannot stay," he said. "I must return to the Temple afterward, and never see the daughter we make."

"Daugh — " She put a hand to her mouth, then controlled herself. "I understand. The village will care for me. After all their talk of a curse they must, or lose face."

Cet nodded and held out a hand to her. Her face wavered for a moment beneath a mix of emotions — sudden doubt, fear, resignation, and hope — and then she crossed the room, took his hand, and sat down beside him.

"You must...show me how," he said, ducking his eyes. "I have never done this thing."

Namsut stared at him, then blessed him with the first genuine, untainted smile he had ever seen on her face. He smiled back, and in a waking dream saw a horse running, running, over endless green.

"I have never *wanted* to do this thing before now," she said, abruptly shy. "But I know the way of it." And she stood.

Her mourning garments slipped to the floor. Cet fixed his eyes on them, trying not to see the movements of her body as she stripped off her headcloth and undergarments. When she knelt straddling his lap, he trembled as he turned his face away, his breath quickening and heart pounding fast. *A Gatherer belongs wholly to the Goddess*, that was the oath. He could hardly think as Namsut's hands moved down the bare skin of his chest, sliding towards the clasp of his loinskirt, yet he forced his mind to ponder the matter. He had always taken the oath to mean celibacy, but that was foolish, for the Goddess had never been interested in mere flesh. He loved Namsut and yet his duty, his calling, was still first in his heart.

Was that not the quintessence of a Gatherer's vow?

Then Namsut joined their bodies, and he looked up at her in wonder.

"H-holy," he gasped. She moved again, a slow undulation in his lap, and he pressed his head back against the wall to keep from crying out. "This is holy."

Her breath was light and quick on his skin; dimly he understood that she had some pleasure of him as well. "No," she whispered, cupping his face between her hands. Her lips touched his; for a moment he thought he tasted sugared currants before she licked free. "But it will get better."

It did.

They returned to the Temple five days later, carrying the narcomancer's jungissa as a guarantee of the villagers' good faith. The Superior immediately dispatched scribes and tallymen to verify the condition of the parent stone and calculate an appropriate price. The payment they brought for the narcomancer's jungissa alone was enough to buy a year's food for the whole village.

Ginnem bid Cet farewell at the gates of the city, where a party of green- and gold-clad women waited to welcome him home. "You made the hard choice, Gatherer," he said. "You're stronger than I thought. May the Goddess grant your child that strength in turn."

Cet nodded. "And you are wiser than I expected, Sister. I will tell this to all my brothers, that perhaps they might respect your kind more."

Ginnem chuckled. "The gods will walk the earth before that happens!" Then he sobered, the hint of sadness returning to his eyes. "You need not do this, Gatherer Cet."

"This is Her will," Cet replied, reaching up to grip Ginnem's shoulder. "You see so much, so clearly; can you not see that?"

Ginnem gave a slow nod, his expression troubled. "I saw it when I realized you loved that woman. But..."

"We will meet again in dreams," Cet said softly.

Ginnem did not reply, his eyes welling with tears before he turned sharply away to rejoin his Sisters. Cet watched in satisfaction as they surrounded Ginnem, forming a comforting wall. They would take good care of him, Cet knew. It was the Sisterhood's gift to heal the soul.

So Cet returned to the Temple, where he knelt before the Superior and made his report — stinting nothing when it came to the tale of Namsut. "Sister Ginnem examined her before we left," he said. "She is healthy and should have little trouble delivering the child when the time comes. The firstwife did not take the news happily, but the elder council vowed that the first child of their reborn village would be cared for, along with her mother who so clearly has the gods' favor."

"I see," said the Temple Superior, looking troubled. "But your oath...that was a high price to pay."

Cet lifted his head and smiled. "My oath is unbroken, Superior. I still belong wholly to Her."

The Superior blinked in surprise, then looked hard at Cet for a long moment. "Yes," he said at last. "Forgive me; I see that now. And yet..."

"Please summon one of my brothers," Cet said.

The Superior started. "Cet, it may be weeks or months before the madness — "

"But it will come," Cet said. "That is the price of Her magic; that is what it means to be a true narcomancer. I do not begrudge the price, but I would rather face a fate of my choosing." The horse was in his mind again, its head lunging like a racer's against the swift river current. Sweet Namsut; he yearned for the day he would see her again in dreams. "Fetch Gatherer Liyou, Superior. Please."

The Superior sighed, but bowed his head.

When young Liyou arrived and understood what had to be done, he stared at Cet in shock. But Cet touched his hand and shared with him a moment of the peace that Namsut had given him, and when it was done Liyou wept. Afterward Cet lay down ready, and Liyou put his fingertips over Cet's closed eyes.

"Cetennem," Cet said, before sleep claimed him for the final time. "I heard it in a dream. My daughter's name shall be Cetennem."

Then with a joyful heart, Cet — Gatherer and narcomancer, servant of peace and justice and the Goddess of Dreams — ran free.