

A man - young, still more tender than iron with age - skulked through the ancient city ruins, cutting from shadow to shadow. He hid from the angry, glaring sun when he was able, but had difficulty finding shadows large enough still to cover him. With the sun directly overhead, only a few scant north-side shadows remained into which to escape, and even in those the stone still baked beneath his feet. Had he been wiser, the young man would have already found a place to stop, some roof to see him through the hottest hours of the day. That was the method of the great messengers: to walk from first light until the sun's glare could no longer be endured, and from late afternoon until the night was too dark to see the path, to eat and sleep as they could in the stretches between. Only then could the message-runners keep the pace demanded of them, the pace that strained a mortal's endurance. At that pace, Hermes took note. There was a fine line between earning the favor of a god for excellence, and the ire of a god for hubris.

Certainly the young man was a messenger. He carried a scroll case in one hand as comfortably as a warrior would his spear. Though his cheeks were still smooth with youth, he was lean of body, with muscles visibly defined beneath his skin. That was a shame. A little fat was nice. His calves were as taut as bow-strings. But he could hardly be a *great* messenger - he was too young, too inexperienced. His beard was not yet filled in across his chin. He didn't know the land through which he passed. He attempted to swallow saliva thick like clay, but choked on it instead. His empty water skin bounced weightlessly at his side. He had tied his cape over his head, presumably to keep off the sun, but instead the dark cloth made an oven around his head. His eyes flicked madly at the shadows, hinting at the onset of delirium. Yet he still held his scroll case firmly, making it an extension of his arm.

Though he pressed to the side of crumbling walls and broken columns in an attempt to soak up the shrinking shade, shadows aplenty beckoned to the man. The city had been abandoned for centuries, yet few of the homes and shops had collapsed. They still stood in great stacks, like crates piled on docks, three or four stories tall, connected by narrow open staircases made of the same baked bricks as the walls. Windows and doorways yawned wide beneath complete roofs, tempting him with their dark shade inside, offering themselves to the man like costermongers lining the way, pushing their wares on him. Still he pressed on.

There were no bandits here, and he would know that. No-one lived within the bounds of the horizon in any direction; there was nothing but hostile, lifeless desert. The young man wouldn't even have to step into the buildings; he could sleep in a doorway without fear of being robbed of his precious scroll case, his empty water skin, his blunted dagger. But he didn't so much as linger as he passed the buildings by.

And he was wise not to do so. Wiser still would have been to avoid the city altogether, to turn back before he entered it, to find the longer way around. Something must have driven him in. These ruins were *wrong*. Bones - human bones - lay draped out of windows, some still completely articulated skeletons. Even scavenger creatures would not come to these ruins. Craters as big as market stalls pocked the road and carved cyclopean bites out of otherwise upright walls. The edges of the craters were black and glassy - burnt stone, as though forge-fire had splattered down from heaven. A gray stone not native to the desert had risen out of the ground like a fungus to enclose pillars and thresholds.

People. Here and there skeletons were embedded within the unbroken, living stone - fossils far too new to be natural. Earth and heaven both had turned against this city. It had been cursed. Not even the sun's unrelenting wrath was reason enough for the young man to stay, and to inherit the curse for his folly.

For the hundredth time, the young man whipped his head around, to gaze back over his shoulder. His eyes searched the streets but found nothing. He shuddered, skin crawling, but moved on again, picking his way around a crater to the other side of the street, where there were no shadows at all, where he had to lift his hand to shield his eyes. Since he'd entered the city, he'd acted as though he felt eyes on his back, no matter which way he turned. Sometimes he had good reason. Though no creatures lived here, loose stones skittered from the rooftops to the street below. Wings beat at the air, though no buzzards circled overhead. He stopped to listen, and a breath other than his own continued for another cycle. Cursed and haunted both, this city, and here the haunts were not afraid of the sun. Dying here would earn him no honorable afterlife. His spirit would be fodder for ghouls.

Yet there was no escape for the man. Whatever had driven him in did not show him the path out. He could have walked across the city from wall to wall in an hour if he'd known the way, but the way was not so easy. Again and again he found himself turning down a road to emerge in the city's agora, where only one of the temples still stood on its pedestal. The others were wrecks of broken marble columns scarred by the brimstone that had toppled them, entombed in the stone that had risen from the ground to swallow them. Again and yet again he turned from the agora to seek the city gates, only to find himself returning from a new direction. Keeping the sun to one side was impossible - the streets twisted and turned and split like the branches of a gnarled old olive tree. He marked his way by dragging his sandal through the sand blown in off the desert, but found the paths curving back on each other, defying reason.

His shoulders sagged as the hope drained from him. He wore the expression of one hunted by death, but too tired to continue running. Only then did he cast his gaze on the structures around him, admitting to his need of them. Instead of stepping through a doorway, though, he placed his dusty sandal on the lowest stair of the tallest building near to him. There would be no escaping the burn of the sun if he went higher, but he might at least see the way out, or spot whatever it was that watched him. Slowly, step after step, he began the wearying climb to the top.

He stopped at the first roof to lift his hand to shade his eyes, to survey the street from where he was. It was not high enough - the city was still a Labyrinth to his eyes.

A sound from behind him, like a sail beating against its ropes in the high wind, startled him, but he didn't have time to turn before he was struck between his shoulders, knocking from the ledge. Great claws raked his back as he fell, then crushed him against the street below. His breath was dashed from his lungs by the great weight crashing down atop him. The fall dazed him, glazing his vision with silver stars. The paving stones burned his skin. Hot, humid breath washed over his cheek.

"I am the eyes that watched you," a gloating voice purred in his ear. The man twisted, catching a glimpse from beneath his cape-turned-cowl. His expression fell in dismay when his vision cleared and he looked upon a face - an all-too-human face, a *woman's* face - looming just above his. Her eyes were

golden, and ringed in black. The shadow she cast over him was the most the city had offered him all day. His breath returned in a gasp, and with a sudden, desperate cry he struck at her. But she fell on him, catching his throat in her teeth through his cape, clenching again to find his windpipe. His cry gurgled to nothing. He couldn't breathe. Fighting off the claws that pinned his shoulders and scrabbled at his thighs was impossible. His desperation turned to horror before he lost consciousness.

The young man woke with a groan. He lifted a hand to his head - or began to until a great paw stepped squarely on his forearm, flattening it back to the stone. The shaded, cool stone.

His eyes opened wide, just in time to squeeze one shut again as a rough tongue dragged up his cheek and past his brow, leaving a thin trail of saliva on his skin to cool in her panting breath. He flinched, cried out in alarm, tried to pull away, but the weight on his chest doubled. She licked him again. He tasted of the residue of sweat. Her tongue watered for more.

"Good. You're awake. Afternoon in late summer is no time to be outdoors in Gomorrah. Get up." She settled back to the stones at his feet, removing her weight from his chest.

Slowly he propped himself up on his elbows, then he scrambled back on hands and feet until he hit the smoothed frame of the doorway. His face lost color when he realized he was half-indoors, that a roof was the reason he was shaded, but he kept his disbelieving eyes on her. They flicked over her form, taking it in. She had a woman's face, mostly, and a woman's neck and shoulders and breasts, though all were a fraction too large for any natural woman. Beneath the bronzed skin of her shoulders, her arms became the tawny-furred forelimbs of a lion, ending with large, fist-like paws with black claws. Her body, too, had the shape and gold-brown fur of a lion, and behind her whisked a tufted lion's tail, though too long even for her large size. Folded across her back were the wings of an eagle, but sized larger than any eagle that had ever lived. The pinions alone were longer than his entire leg. She weighed as much as any three men, and he was no wrestler to begin with.

The man could not help but take in the whole of her, but it was her face, her glossy black hair, her neck and chest on which they fixed. Fear of her was not the only reason for his silence. She could have been a sister of Helen's. Certainly, though, fear was there too. She could smell it.

Fear won. She sat back on her haunches and raised an impatient brow when his vision finally broke away from her. He glanced about furtively, obviously seeking an escape route. She hadn't crowded him; he could rush right back out into the street, where scuffs in the grit marked the line along which she'd dragged him to the shadow. His robe lay there still, creased green-gray wool, stark against the stark sun-bleached sandstone. She sat calmly, aloof but for the occasional flick of her tail, giving no indication that she could run him down in a single bound, though she could.

He realized then that the shoulder of his tunic had been pulled down around his arm when his cape was torn away, leaving his chest bare. It had the sheen not of sweat - he was too parched to perspire - but of her saliva. The thin, wiry curls on his chest had been plastered upward toward his neck.

More alarmingly, his tunic had been crumpled up above his belt, and the insides of his thighs and his loins had the same sheen, the same cool of evaporating saliva. His eyes widened, still disbelieving, and he hastily smoothed out the tunic to cover himself.

She merely rolled her eyes and huffed, then licked her lips for the taste of him that lingered. "Get *UP*, man! There is no time to waste. Your clothing is a distraction, but you can wait to remove it until we are inside and out of this heat. You need water. Your body is too warm. You will die soon." Her eyes gleamed like gems, bright against the dark lids that surrounded them. Her lips and the underside of her wrinkling nose were just as dark, lending to her already feline features. Behind her snarl, short fangs overlapped otherwise human teeth. She could read his thoughts on his face. How human was she? She could have almost been human, in the head at least, despite it all. Her hair was loosely, sloppily plaited - a vain attempt at vanity. A heavy gold circlet had been clasped around her neck. Her features were familiarly Phoenician, like his. Her contemptuous expression could have been worn by any of dozen different female faces he'd known at home. She was beautiful. Had she been entirely human, he would have already been thinking of bedding her. From the way his eyes lingered, even sun-fevered as he was, he was thinking about it already. What could he be reading in her face? Nothing, she was certain. Her inscrutability was practiced. "We can speak along the way. You can tell me what brings you to my domain."

His hand closed on empty grit. His eyes went wide, lashed out in every direction until they found the scroll case behind her paw. By that, she had him trapped. It was his anchor. His gaze flicked back up to her face, steeling as he found the focus to build up his determination.

"That is mine. I must have it. I am a messenger, sent on by court of Mattan Baal, King of Arvad. He does not forget, or forgive those who owe him a debt. I must have it and be off at once. I am due in Megiddo."

Her eyes narrowed back at him, but she did not relinquish the scroll case. "That is far to the south, and you are not on the best path."

"I am on the path he set me on! Personally!" the young man pleaded. She could glimpse his history in his eyes. She knew of Mattan Baal, and knew he was quick to anger. Rash, he was. He would kill a messenger who brought him bad news. He would kill this young man without a thought for it, unless he saw a better use for him.

"Get up," her voice urged, now soothing. "Come with me, to where there is shade and water. We cannot tarry here, but there I will tell you of many things. I will tell you my name."

"I know what you are!" His unsteady hand pointed at her, accusing her. "I know *who* you are. You're the Sphinx! You're Phix, the Sphinx."

"STAND UP!" she roared, lunging forward a half-step. He did. Caught between his desire and fear of her, her command found no resistance. But his eyes went back to the scroll case, and with a boldness that surprised her, he inched forward, bent slowly toward her and reached between her paws.

Such impetuousness could not be tolerated, much less rewarded; she curled back her lips, baring her short fangs, and snarled. He flinched at the sound, but did not withdraw, and dared let his fingers touch the case. He grabbed, and she snapped; both caught what they were after and did not let go. While he clutched his precious case, she dragged him by the wrist back out into the street, into the sun, toward the center of the city he'd been so careful to avoid. Even sunbaked, his flesh was tender and pliant between her teeth, inviting her to bite harder. Her mouth watered as it hadn't in years. He would never know what restraint was required merely to hold him and do nothing more.

"Where are you taking me, Phix? If you mean to kill me, you can just make your attempt here, then I will be on my way." Despite his challenging words, he stumbled along after her, not daring to yank his wrist out from between her teeth. Some of the conviction was gone from his voice. Though a lion half her size could kill him easily, his eyes remained fixed to her woman's portion.

She didn't let go of his wrist - and thus she did not respond - until she'd pulled him to the ancient city's main road. Beyond brimstone craters and overturned cobblestones, between the frame of broken columns, the street offered a clear view of the still-standing temple and the open mouth of its doorway. Once she loosed her hold, though, she swallowed. "Out of the sun. I could have killed you while you were unconscious, if I desired. I could have killed you before you knew who followed you. I could kill you now, if that was my wish. Come with me and you'll live longer. It's far easier to deprive a man of breath than to take... other things. Don't delay. And don't ask so many questions. You make a fool of yourself. Listen instead, even when I do not speak, and you will learn much."

He walked along with her, though she didn't drag him. Perhaps he had learned some wisdom already and succumbed to her strength. 'Make your attempt,' he had said, as though he were Theseus. The scroll case he still clutched was no sword. She would pick her teeth with his knife. He remained silent, too. Had he protested or begged, she might simply have killed him to be done with his complaints. She could not bear complaints. He squared his shoulders, shaded his eyes, and matched her easy lope toward the temple with a nervous, too-quick gait. A long, pleasant silence passed between them, broken only by the scrape of his sandals on stone and the quieter pad of her feet, until he at last demonstrated the foolishness of man and spoke again. This time, he did not phrase it as a question.

"You *are* Phix."

She, too, did not respond for a stretch, but the need to respond, to prevent that statement from remaining unchallenged, boiled away inside her. She glanced at him but said nothing. Her tail furiously; her jaw clenched. At last it was too much for her. "I am *a* Phix. A sphinx." As if that explained everything.

He cast a sidelong glance, and she rolled her eyes, as though it were his fault that her need to clarify was obsessive.

"My sisters and I are all called Phix. We all share a fragment of her soul, and thus her name. And the same curse."

That explained little more, but it answered his question well enough to trigger the next, of course.

"Doesn't that mean you have to ask me a riddle?"

"Is that what you want? A riddle?" She sighed, exasperated, but asked him all the same, "What must be--"

"MAN!" he blurted it out too soon. "Man, it's always 'man'."

"Aren't you clever." She turning her eyes forward again, continuing her stride.

"Am I right? I'm free to go now, right?"

"You could go any time. I might strike you down at any time. You could remain in the sun to wither, or you could follow me to water. But you did not let me finish. I could have been about to ask you, 'What must be skinned twice before it can be eaten?' You would be right, then, too." Bunching the muscle in her jaw again, she kept at the same pace toward the temple, right up to the base of the steps. She stopped there, turning back to him. "The Phix you're thinking of posed her riddle because she was bored, not because of any divine requirement. Despite her curse, she had everything she wanted. I don't share that particular problem, man."

Though she mounted the first step leading to the temple, the young man didn't. His fear again got the better of him. Earlier he'd been as hurried as she was to get out from the glaring sun, but now he hesitated. He looked on the dark, empty doorways - the heavy bronze doors could be seen now between the columns, thrown outward and off their hinges - with a fear even greater than he held for her. He pulled back, digging his sandal heels into the steps, until she bit his wrist again and clenched down hard - hard enough to bruise his flesh, to feel tendons pop across bones. That was no punishment for her, but she rathered he didn't make her mouth so eager.

"Why won't you *hurry*," she hissed through her teeth. At the top of the pedestal she yanked him forward, then released him to lower her head and butt him between the columns and through the doorway.

"I'm not exactly in a rush to be anywhere but Megiddo."

"You should be. What is your name?"

"Atenor," he admitted, rubbing at the impressions her teeth had left in his wrist. "Son of Arenos." He glanced about him, at the columns stretching like giant cedars above his head, at the doors more than double his height, thick as his finger was long, and bent like lead plates. There was more shade in the portico than he'd encountered all day. The still air was cool by comparison. By contrast to the half-lit space between the columns, the inside of the temple itself was too dark for his sun-blinded eyes. He hesitated again, just inside the door, while his eyes adjusted. A shaft of light speared down from the temple ceiling, not because the roof had collapsed there, but through an opening meant to

feed a pool beneath. A very thin layer of water - barely a puddle - lined the tiles at the bottom of the pool.

"Hurry, Atenor." This time instead of nudging him with her shoulder or head, she nipped above his hips, catching a bit of skin through the rough-cloth tunic. It pinched so nicely. "Your time is wasting. And mine."

He yelped at the sudden, sharp pain, but now he had better reason than competing fear to proceed inside - the water. Now he hurried ahead of her to kneel beside the pool, to bend low and press his water skin against the tiles to try to gather what little he could. She strode up behind him, placed a paw in the small of his back, and pushed, sending him sprawling into the pool. "Drink!" Only by his luck did he manage to cling to his scroll case as he fell prone.

She put the same paw down in the water and bent gracefully to lap up a few drops, then lifted her eyes to be certain he'd seen her example. After that quick moment she withdrew, and licked away the water that clung to her paw. She didn't require *water*.

"So that's it?" His tunic was drenched, his face dripping. He brushed his hair back where it clung to his brow. But his eyes glinted again when they focused on her. "No riddle or anything? You're just going to kill me now that I've been watered, now that I won't crumble to dust?" He turned in the pool, backing to the far side and putting the shallow water between them while reaching for anything - a loose stone, an old rod, anything that would make a better weapon than the scroll case he still held delicately out of the water. But there was nothing else, and in the end he made his choice. He extended the case en gard between them. "You *want* to kill me."

She made a sound of disgust and rolled her eyes. "You men are insufferable. The one blessing granted to sphinxes is the lack of males. Without the stupidity of the androsphinx, Aegypt would never have fallen to ruin." She crouched at the edge of the pool, shoulders low, tail lashing through the air.

Despite his words, his eyes widened when he realized what she intended. He began to scramble out of the pool, just in time for her to leap across, to pounce on him and send him crashing to the stone on the far side where she pinned him flat. His muscles had tone in them now that he had water in him. Now that he had some hope again. "Insufferable, but necessary." Her eyes focused tight on his. "And sometimes, desirable."

Her breath already rolled over his face, but now she leaned lower, as though she were about to kiss him, and licked away the water that dripped from his lips and chin. He jerked back, pressing his lips tightly shut, but she just moved down to his throat, where a deep purr rumbled out of her chest with each stroke of her tongue. Her paw raked at the top of his tunic, leaving raw red welts at his chest before he understood what she wanted, and though he had to fight her to do it, he got his hands beneath her claws and pulled open the laces at his neck, drawing it wide until he had to tear it to expose his chest. Eagerly her tongue found his nipple, and her teeth followed, brushing against it, teasing it. She was gentle enough to ease the worry that made his breath catch in his chest... at first. He'd only just relaxed when, without warning, she rolled the tender nibble of flesh between her foreteeth as though

she meant to nip it off. With a cry of pain he struck at her shoulder; she growled and pinned his arm down, then buried her face in his armpit. Snuffling, she filled her senses with the scent of sweat and residue of musk that the pool had not washed away. The bitter, vibrant taste filled her mouth with saliva, and made her stomach twist around the empty pit there. Her purr returned, along with a possessive growl.

"What--"

"I want your body, Atenor. Isn't it obvious? I *need* you for your seed. Can't you see it in my eyes? Can't you smell the rut on me? Can't you smell that I am in my season? Are you so nose-blind? I smell the sex on *you*. It *clings* to a human like fear or stupidity. Rut and fear belong to all creatures, but stupidity - that is your unique curse." Grabbing the other side of his tunic in her teeth, she tore the fabric down to his waist, then nosed beneath his other arm to lap at that garden of human flavor as well. "You should be thankful your curse is so simple. Suitable for your intellect. The curse of the sphinx is more existential.

"Mmm." She continued to murmur through the satisfied purr his essence elicited. "We are a curse, my sisters and I. A curse *and* cursed. But a curse nonetheless. Mankind is the creature who explores, who reaches, who expands; we are the divinity of the borders, the *limes*, defining the edge of human knowledge, the extent of your lands, your access to the divine. We are your boundary. We are your wolves, nipping at your heels. And you accept it, bleating and running in terror when we bare our teeth." Her words came out muffled from the curve beneath his armpit, but she could not be persuaded to deprive herself of him now. "The gods have decreed that man must not trespass on old Gomorrah; thus we guard it." She shifted to lift her head, to chase a drop of sweat trickling from his temple with her lips, and lowered her voice to whisper into his ear. "And you *will* be punished for your trespass, Atenor.

"But we are cursed as well. Look upon me, son of Arenos!" Her shoulders bulged outward, her wings stretched like a gull's about to catch the wind, and her tail lashed like a whip. Her claws followed their scimitar bend out of her paws, digging into his shoulders. "I am the best of the mightiest of creatures. I have the strength of a lion, though no lion has ever walked the desert that is as strong as I." Her wings flapped twice, hard enough to make his ears pop from the pressure. "No eagle's wings stretched quite so wide as mine. And no man's mind is quite so keen, nor tongue so golden. And yet-" Drawing a deep breath in, she released it with a sigh and laid herself across his chest once again to peer down at him. "What are wings that cannot fly, but an encumbrance? I can't soar with these; I can barely flutter like a chicken. What good is the strength - and *hunger* - of a lion, without its jaws, and teeth. I do not bake *bread*, or harvest *beans*, and yet that that is the shape of my mouth. The lion wants to rip flesh from bones, but these teeth are better suited for *leaves*. And what use is a mind, with its plans and aspirations and desires, if there are no *hands* with which to effect them?" Her voice rang with ancient despair.

He felt small and temporary beneath her. "I don't know, Phix."

"Yes, yes. Exactly. Stupid and simple."



"I'm not either! Mankind built the temple you are in. We are not stupid!"

"Is that so? Am I not lovely, Atenor?" Before he could stammer an answer she cut him off. "I know that I am. And I have told you I am in rut and in hurry, and still you shrivel beneath me like the shed snake's scales. Where is your intelligence? Useless because it is the body of a lion I press against you? You would have me anyway." Falling all the way over him, into the flat-bellied repose of the Egyptian sphinx, the claws of her forepaws raked down to his belly. She looked at him one more time, over the horizon of his body, then burrowed her head beneath the skirt of his tunic, burying her tongue and lips in the humid flesh between his thighs just as she had his armpit. She licked at the musk there, careless of the wet noises her mouth made, to bring his erection quickly to life. "See?" She looked up from beneath his tunic. "Your body is wise. It is your simple, stupid human mind that cannot fathom your best purpose." Her eyes remained on his as she took his phallus fully into her mouth, suckling on it - gently even - until she'd drawn her head back far enough that it fell free.

Atenor's eyes rolled back, his back arched, and he clasped a hand to his forehead. It took him a moment to regain his senses under this sudden barrage against his dignity. "If humans are so stupid, why is a human head your crown?"

Her eyes flashed with mirth above the hem of his tunic; she had just begun to dive beneath again. "Aren't you the clever one? Just for that--" Still keeping her eyes locked to his, she nuzzled until she found his erect member with her lips - then gave it a solid bite, as hard as she had his wrist, clamping down until he cried out and fought to push her away. She laughed cruelly when she sat back again, pulling away to lick her lips and loom above his legs. "The stupidity of man is not in their capabilities, but how they use them. You could be using this already to fill my need, and you would not have been bitten.

"No, sweet Atenor - salty, bitter, tasty Atenor - mankind is foolish indeed. You do not even see your inheritance! The world is yours, and you let the gods build fences around you. When the gods were created by the Titans, and given stewardship of creation so the Titans could take their leisure, the Titans were cast down, and the gods took creation for their own. Just as the Titans cast down their forbearers, and they cast down theirs. Mankind has inherited the world, and yet mankind does nothing to subvert their gods, save by the accident of atheism. Look how they abuse you, and treat you like sheep! Do you truly believe ambrosia arrives at Olympus on the wings of doves from no-one knows where? Or that the souls of man are sent to the underworld for eternal stagnation? Do you not see the connection? You *are* stupid sheep, man, and are treated as such - sheered for your wool, slaughtered for your meats. My soul is divine. Ichor flows through my veins. But I need not wait for Pluto to press the ambrosia from you."

She lunged forward then, claws once again bared as she pounced on his chest. Crying out, he raised his arms to protect himself, but she only panted, and allowed herself to be distracted by a trickle of pool water on his forearm, which she caught with her lips.

"Why did you follow me here, to my own lair, if you are not a fool? Pain and desire makes fools of us all." Her lids hung low as she pushed herself away from his body to walk deeper into the temple building, beyond the column of sunlight. Her tail flicked behind her when she glanced back just long

enough to indicate that he was to follow. "Perhaps it is best that man has not taken their inheritance. If we sphinges inherited creation, the bones of the gods would have already been ground into dust. But you delay, and thus you delay the cycle."

He stood, glanced back at the open doorway, letting his eyes linger and his mind consider, until she called, "Come, Atenor. Enough time has been wasted on talk."

"What cycle? And why would that make you happy? You despise men."

"Stupid, stupid. You will create children of your mind, and give the world to them so that you may take your leisure. Have you not listened? You will rely on them, and the fruits of their labor. And they will rise up, and cast you down, and mankind will be no more. And that would truly be a pity. Mankind is stupid, but I do not despise them. I adore men."

She had stopped among what appeared to be old cushions and crumpled rugs, trampled into a sort of nest. But he did not look closely at the surroundings, not when his eyes were fixed on her. She'd stopped facing away from him, forelimbs and breasts down, hindlegs and tail up, to present her sex. Her head lolled on one of her shoulders as she turned back to meet his eye. Her golden eyes glinted. "This is what you followed me for, young Atenor. This was your hope, now offered to you. Plant your seed in me. I have wasted too much good time already."

The man hesitated, torn between the tickle of fear her words encouraged, and the lodestone tug of his erection.

"Don't let your mind make a fool of you, man! You see a beast, but I am a god! If you will not treat me as an equal, then BEND YOUR KNEE before me, close your eyes and WORSHIP!"

Her timing was right; the clear command in her voice nudged him off the cusp. He stumbled forward as though yanked, dropping to his knees behind her before his senses came back to him. He found himself a hand's width from the fur-clad backside that faced him, and he swallowed. Woman, beast, or god, she smelled of sex now. Even for his simple nose, it was undeniable. His body recognized the scent better than his mind did. When she hissed at him to "HURRY!" he closed his eyes, and kissed the tender folds of bare, black skin that glistened eagerly for him. The peculiarity of short, soft hair brushing his cheeks, of a tail lashing above his head and against his shoulders, faded quickly behind the influence of her wordless voice. With his eyes closed, her moans of pleasure, her groans, her gasps, the little sounds of her breath catching in her throat, were all very female, very feminine. He found himself delving with his tongue, bringing a hand down to spread her sex and slide a finger inside her, as he would have any other lover. His hesitance passed completely within minutes, and his own needs became his master; he stood and pressed his erection deep within her. "Unghhhhh." She was soft and wet and inviting, completely unlike the desert outside. But the desert - and everything else - was forgotten when the two of them exhaled together and began the beastly work of mating.

Later they lay together among the cushions, and she licked the fresh sheen of sweat from his body. Her eyes flicked appraisingly over the muscles that worked beneath his skin. A little more youth-fat would have been better, but he was lovely. They'd flopped to their sides together, exhausted after she'd demanded he go "Again!" He'd strained to stay erect within her long enough to pump out another fleeting ejaculation.

Throughout the coupling she had been... not patient, but cooperative. She pushed back against his thrusting, spread her legs and lifted her hips up to meet his. Her tail and twined possessively around his neck, but she'd refrained from flicking it in his face. The muscles within her clenched around his shaft on each outstroke to milk his arousal. But once they fell together, her cooperation ended. She couldn't abide the vulnerable, submissive position it put her in - her back pressed to his belly - for even a moment. Instead she flipped out from under his arm, stretched her wings until they shook, and plopped back down on top of him. After a moment she stood up again, batted her wings at the air, and turned around to lay opposite, her hips heavy on his chest, the base of her tail batting against his nose, her paws spreading his thighs. Like a dog licking the remains from a plate, she lowered her head and began grooming away their mingled fluids. Her tongue dragged his wiry hair flat along the inside of his legs. The fool of a man groaned in pleasure.

"Will you be able to produce your seed again soon?" she asked, while she used her paw to pull his flaccid penis off to one side so she could clean the wrinkles at its base. "Can you mate again this hour? Less than that?" Her tongue became more invasive and her teeth followed, as though she thought she could scrape the flavor out of his skin.

He grunted back his instinct to howl when she nibbled, and twisted his hips to try to throw her off, but she spread her wings and used them for balance, turning them this way and that while he writhed. She didn't even have to let her full weight fall on him. She wanted him to breathe a while yet, after all. "STOP," she commanded.

This time her command failed. He didn't even flinch. "You stop! If you want me to produce anything again, you need to leave me alone long enough to recover."

"This?" She stopped mid-lick, hooked her paw loosely between his legs to pull his stones closer, then completed the motion of her tongue before glancing back along her flank to grin at him. More slowly she demonstrated again, dragging her tongue across his groin.

"Yes!"

"As you wish."

Again she stood, casually trampling him supine into the cushions, and sat down straddling him. Her hips enfolded his, trapping the warmth of his bare skin against hers. Her tail wound like a blind snake around his leg. Above her, her wings draped like a vulture's, shading him from the bit of light shining through the oculus. Her face and breasts were softly lit, like the marble of a statue in a niche. Like a statue's, they were perfect. Atenor's eyes sparkled with post-coital wonder. He reached up to

stroke her neck perfect neck, then her perfect cheek with the side of his knuckle. Without warning she snapped, catching his finger in her teeth, but it was a playful bite - almost gentle. When she released his finger, she lifted her chin so he could touch her again. He was a bold one, though - he propped himself on one arm to cup her breast and bring it to his lips. Teased by his tongue, her nipple hardened and she drew in a sharp breath; after a moment settled down across his chest, flattening him again. He would have to bear her weight. Her forelegs - her paws - scooped beneath his head to fold him into place, as though she were nursing him. Her hips pressed distractedly against his. Beneath her, despite his wince of over-use, his phallus thickened and became firm again.

"I would like to keep you, Atenor." She nuzzled through his walnut-brown curls, murmuring, lapping occasionally to drag her tongue through his hair, or when she could, to reach his ear. "A divinity should have a priest to do for her that which she cannot." Shifting him in her paws so she could meet his eyes. "You could have so many uses."

Very bold! He raised his head to meet her lips with a quick kiss. "Once more, Phix, and then I *must* go. There isn't time. I have to deliver this - my life depends on it." His hand reached for the scroll case, but it was beyond his grasp. When he turned his head to find it, she moved a paw onto his head, keeping it twisted in that direction to expose his neck. She licked between the muscle cords, and when a vein leapt to the surface she pinched at it with her teeth, as through trying to pull it out of his skin. He yelped at the pain, but there was no moving out from beneath her, especially not with her wings open and flapping occasionally to push her down.

"There isn't time," she agreed, admiring her handiwork. She'd managed to nick his skin above the vein, and red trickled out to mingle with her saliva. She lapped it away again. "But it is a shame. I could teach you to twist a braid or tighten a curl, so you could set my hair properly. There is so much jewelry here, but never any hands with which to close the clasps in place. There is far too much for which a lion's claws are not suited. My beauty goes squandered. And we could mate."

"I could-- anngggh... Gods!" He tried to lift his arms, to push her mouth away, but she had begun working at that little wound, trying to scrape it with her fangs or peel back the skin with her front teeth. When neither worked, she closed her mouth on the nick, both to suck and clench down on the muscles beneath it. His hands moved futilely beneath her, finding no leverage to push her off with. "I could send you a slave girl..." he continued in a choked voice. Desperation set in. "I can wait! I can stay! We'll mate as many times as you want." Despite the pain - or perhaps *because* of it, peculiar as men were - his erection was as hard as it had ever been.

"No, sweetest." She released his throat, allowing color returned to his flesh. "There is no time."

Feet like hers padded into the temple, first at a trot, than a quicker lope, claws scratching against stone. More paws followed, and more. Wings beat the air. Voices snarled back and forth at each other, closing in at a near gallop.

"They are already here."

The Phix atop him turned to snarl possessively as the others rushed in, but it was more a matter of protocol than threat. Five bounded forward, racing each other across the temple floor, wings fighting each other for space to beat at the air. "A man!" "I smelled a man!" They rushed for the nest where she lay, but they barely saw her.

Though she blocked them with her body, the man could hear them coming clearly enough. He'd given up on trying to escape her pin, but fresh terror made him try again anyway. Perhaps if he could see them, see how they were each more beautiful than the next, he would have welcomed them. Perhaps not. She braced an arm across his chest, pressed her cheek flat to his, and kept the hold she had on his throat, but he howled and writhed, and tried to kick off the first of the sphinges to arrive and fall on his legs. They came in claws and teeth first, eyes wide and glistening. Ignoring her snarls they crashed into him, throwing both of them about, fighting with each other for his legs, then to crowd at his open arm and shoulder. The last of them, the most impetuous Phix of all, wedged her head up between his thighs, burying her face between his groin and the belly of the Phix atop him. She despised the face of her sister in that moment, though it was nearly her own. She would have been just as eager she knew, just as demanding, if she found her sister with a man, but this man was *her* claim. Yet she could do nothing but growl as he was stolen from her. As though senseless to the man's delicate condition, they raked at him with their claws, and pinched and nibbled with their teeth in an attempt to open his skin and taste his blood. He was completely overwhelmed; they pinned him easily, reducing his struggles to the tightening of muscles, and his cries to gurgles. Between their futile work on his skin, they dragged their tongues lavishly over him, as impatient for the flavor of a man as she had been at the beginning.

"They've already mated!" the one in his crotch announced breathlessly, and butted the first with her head to make space.

The argument that followed would have been impossible for the man to follow - it was more quick snarls and snapping growls than it was words, and even those were in a language as old as dust. He was like a bag of gold fought over by thieves, dragged this way and that, all the while threatening to spill open, but the dispute was quickly solved. The Phix who had found him kept her hold on his neck (and she clenched her teeth all the tighter on his throat now) while the usurper - younger, but larger and stronger, with wings that filled the space above them when she flexed them - supplanted her atop him. Now *her* head fell so she could lick at his chest and collarbone, snarling again when she had to make room between the others, but her body crouched low. Thin, soft fur rubbed against his loins, in contrast to the sharp teeth that pinched at the skin inside his knee, trying to catch a fold between fangs and snip a new, small tear. She rolled her body up the length of his erection, smearing her moisture across him, trapping his phallus against his pelvis while he grew hard again, then suddenly... Suddenly she went a little farther forward, so his erection sprung up behind her, and when she pushed back, wriggling her hips, he slipped inside her.

The six sphinges each worked separately, filling their noses with his scent, their mouths with his taste. They licked beyond the point that it could possibly be pleasant, until his skin was raw. Yet it was still more comfort than the pains they gave him between licks, when they nipped and bit and dragged their claws over already weltsed skin. At first he howled and fought at each new bruise they gave him when they failed to open his skin, each trickle of blood when they succeeded, but the teeth of the first Phix still clenched into his neck, choking off his breath. He couldn't see clearly. They wore him down until his shallow breaths became gasps. His head swam, his eyes teared over, but slowly his howls became groans, then the occasional grunt. The tone seeped out of his muscle. The sphinx at his neck let go long enough to pinch a bit of skin near the first wound, to twist and yank violently until the wound opened wider and the blood flowed fresh and red. She bit back into his neck, covering his wound before the others could force their way in, and closing off his windpipe as well.

The sphinges at his arms tore, too, or tried to. One worked at the wing of muscle where his pectoral met his shoulder, but she'd barely scraped open the skin over a blackening bruise. His arm didn't even flinch against her ribs any longer, as though he'd accepted her hunger for his meat. Another had his hand propped up in a folded paw and gnawed away at his smallest finger, pulling the other digits back with her paw to keep him from hiding it. Bone splintered between her teeth, but he barely grunted. It wasn't until another crept up between his legs to lap up the sweat and fluids dripping out from the usurper that he gave any sign he was still conscious. She found his scrotum pulled tight against the root of his shaft and began furiously licking, then opened wider to take his stones between her teeth... They had the lovely squish of meat and were far easier to fill her mouth with than anything else on offer. She bit, then twisted and yanked.

The man screamed. He arched, trying to throw them all off, surprising them with his sudden strength. The usurper twisted and snarled when she realized what her sister was after, but it was too late. Throwing her weight into it like a dog yanking on a rag, the one with his testicles threw her head backward and tore them free, chewing the sudden mouthful of bloody meat. He screamed again, but his cry gurgled to nothing. Blood gushed freely now, filling the air with a scent stronger than sex. Now the others snarled and crowded in, but the thief slipped her bloody face back into the gap, biting at the base of his shaft as it softened and slipped inside the usurper. She pulled it free of her sister's body and began gnawing it between her back teeth, attempting to bite it cleanly off, while the last of his strength was wasted in pointless writhing. Now that his flesh was torn, teeth and claws found their job easier. Even before the thief had chewed off her prize, he was torn wider. Beneath thick, glossy black curls and braids, between their raking claws, beneath the cacophony of large wings beating overhead, they ripped open his belly and dragged out his intestines to squabble over them. His throat and his finger were forgotten; all six sphinges pushed in, side by side, to paint their faces red and feast on his entrails. His life spilled away, red and hot, for them to lap up.

Later, when the man was just a cooling, empty corpse to be gnawed on for the next several days and the other sphinges were busy grooming themselves and each other, the Phix who had found young Atenor sought out the scroll case he had valued so highly. She found it nearly lost among the cushions,

and plopped down to lick the blood from her claws so she could work the end off the tube and shake out the scroll inside. Only a fragment of reused papyrus, hastily scrawled on, fell free.

*Honored Sphinges of Gomorrah, this gift is for you. Mattan Baal, Great King of Arvad, does not forget his debts.*