

A Last Remembrance

The Grand Priestess of Ishtar is remembering.

Her role, one she has obediently followed for many years, is to remember futures of unpast: the futures that should not be made to be. What comes to her she reports upon the ear of General Kh'Zhameel, for that is his sole role. To listen to her, and in turn to deliver her remembrances verbatim, so he must, to the *Mammlakh*, king of kings. The king, with the devotion of all those serving Ishtar, does what is needed to put these futures to eternal rest, unawakened, so that prosperity continues. The realm of Ishtar's children thrives.

If Kh'Zhameel's role as a glorified aging errand-boy troubles his honor, he never shows it. Yes, carrying messages is a petty assignment for he who was once, well before her time, a noble warrior, but it is also the most dangerous job in the realm. Twice a day, he comes to listen, eyes lowered. Facing her, facing death from her. It is well that he is a diligent man, careful when performing his role.

A kind man... the remembrances arrive as whispering voices to her mind's ear. When you were a child, a scanty trainee, not yet our Grand Priestess, Kh'Zhameel always stopped his stride upon seeing you running about, or standing in awe among the strange trees in the sun-baked gardens. Marvels of irrigation in this hot and arid land of ours. Truth be said, he could not plan those chance meetings. It was you who knew to appear at the right times of day, slinking away from a chore or a reading that you hoped could wait for later.

The voices continue, reminding her of how he would wave for her to come, gently pat her head, crouch down to be of her height, and hold her small hands in his, sneaking a secret piece of sweetened ginger into her palms. She would look into his eyes, shy yet curious, and he would chuckle, put a finger to his lips, then straighten, and climb up the many ziggurat steps to fulfill his duty; already then, he was the messenger, marching between the twin ziggurats. That of the King, that of the Grand Priestess. Once at dawn, once at dusk.

Today, the Grand Priestess is remembering her younger selves. Surprised, since she had forgotten them all. Unsurprised. It is the appropriate day for them.

She is remembering further back in time: her first audience with the one who came before her. The Grand Priestess is always nameless, the role is all there is. All one and the same, they occupy the same space while time passes. They can hardly be discerned as one assumes the role, and another steps down. All that changes hands, generation to generation, is the crown, if that is really what it is.

The then Grand Priestess sat kneeling on a pillow of blue, gold strands at its fringes. She motioned to child Aiyla, for that once was a name the now remembering priestess carried as her own, to come sit in front of her. Aiyla removed her sandals, slightly out of breath from the climb up the ziggurat, slightly trembling even though she knew near nothing of what was to come. *Remain quiet. Be still no matter what*, said the acolyte preparing her for the first rite. Her first *Ital'oot*.

She crossed the sacred hall, a vast platform cut precisely at seven-eighths of the ziggurat. Translucent chiffon drapes twirled with the winds; the only semblance of walls to the home of the Grand Priestess. Once crowned, she remains in the hall for the duration of her role. The sashaying drapes did nothing to give privacy, but the stage loomed so high above the city that none other than those meant to see saw, and only that which they needed to see.

On her bare feet, Aiyla wore her new trainee bells-chains secured with delicate hoops around her fourth toes, the ring toes. The tiny gold bells murmured in subdued joy as she walked towards the Grand Priestess. Always a jingle, whether for a joyous occasion or one of pure dread. She walked, keeping her gaze on the priestess' folded hands. One mustn't look at Ishtar's Grace in the eye.

The Grand Priestess, Ishtar's Grace, She Who Hears. Her given name was lost. There were many names to fill that impossible void. Aiyla kneeled on her knees in front of her, and she nodded at Aiyla with a content short "hmm". She then rested each of her palms by the straight line of Aiyla's parted hair. Frizzy hair, not as obedient as some of the other girls', but that was not a concern. Hair was a temporary effect for the Grand Priestess to be.

When the time comes for her fourth rite of *Ital'oot*, all of Aiyla's hair would be removed. Follicle by follicle, with a thin needle dripping the venom of the grasssnake, the one they call *se'rafim* in the villages, the one they bring to the temple in woven trap baskets for a small finders-fee. They fear killing the snake for it is sacred to Ishtar. They fear its venom which does not kill but brings to the mind voices, the type village folk want nothing to do with themselves.

Outside the ziggurat temple, little is known of the ways the Grand Priestess and Ishtar's acolytes make use of the snake's mild venom. There are several roles for it. Chief among them is to be used in the four monthly moon ceremonies: *agal* – the full moon, *chasar* – the new moon, *re'eva* – the hungry child, and *shlasht-re'eva* – the indulgent mother-to-be. A far more monotonous use is in the permanent removal of body hair: a pluck, a drop, a small hiss, the disagreeable smell of burnt flesh, an itch that for a brief moment becomes a terrible ache and then subsides into a numb pain lasting a few days.

That tediousness would only begin when she turns sixteen. The Grand Priestess remembrance returns to her first *Ital'oot*. At four years of age she knew little of what was to come. She missed the snakes who played with her in the tall grasses near the river, behind her family hut, snakes that never bit her.

As previously instructed, Aiyla brought her palms together, the tips of her middle fingers touching the delicate space between her brows, the fingers' length resting along her nose, thumbs pressed gently against her chin, the other fingers extended straight, spaced, attentive.

Ishtar's Grace began to chant while moving her palms down Aiyla's head, in what was nearly a gentle caress. Aiyla imagined her father with his heavy calloused fingers, about to go out with his bleating flock into air that will later boil to an impossibility but was still fresh. Dawn. Or her mother, smiling at her in a rare moment of serenity: the baby asleep in the midday heat, flies buzzing over her small head, the toddler occupied with a piece of clay, banging and chewing it, the red earth it's made of softly coloring his mouth. By the time he is a man he would have swallowed much more of it, in ceremony, his skin taking on a slight maroon hue like all men who come of age in Ishtar's Lands.

The Grand Priestess who was once Aiyla gasps at these remembrances, these voices. She did not remember her parents. Neither having them, nor having thought of them during that first *Ital'oot*. An empty vessel since she became Ishtar's Grace, 28 years ago, when she was 28.

But it wasn't a caress of kindness from her predecessor. It was nothing like the gentle hands of Kh'Zhameel and their secret candy. These belonged later in her porous timeline, a timeline now rushing back to her, voice upon voice, fragments. Kh'Zhameel came to her life after her second *Ital'oot*, at eight years of age. He had just been assigned his new role, fresh from the battlefields, the voices say, and she is remembering.

A stroking of her head on her first *Ital'oot* marked the beginning of a journey that was long, not gentle. The first step on a road she had been exiled onto. It was only the previous day that the Grand Priestess learned of Aiyla from the voices, and sent emissaries. Aiyla was plucked from the tall grasses behind the village, cleaned, dressed, and sent up, up the ziggurat.

Palms atop her head, moving down, until The Grand Priestess' ear fingers, the smallest ones, touched the tips of Aiyla's ears. Aiyla wondered if that was how the ear fingers got their names, or perhaps it was because ear fingers were the best for digging inside one's ears for golden, bitter treasures. Back to the top moved the palms, and down her parted hair, again and again. The chant, at first slow and bounded, intensified and grew richer, more textured.

Abruptly, the chant ended. From a small blue pillow placed to her right, the Grand Priestess picked up a tool with a slim gold handle, and a glistening edge shaped into a crescent. That slender moon was sharp, so sharp, and in spite of herself Aiyla's lips trembled and she bit them hard to stop. The pain filled her mouth, giving her a focus of attention.

Head still bowed, she lifted her eyes for a brief moment before recalling it was forbidden. Lucky the priestess was not looking at her. Her heartbeat picked up. Lucky. It was just a single glimpse: Ishtar's Grace examining the tool. In that brief moment, she also caught sight of the massive gold crown, and two fine lines of dried maroon running down the priestess' temples. Eyes lowered once more, Aiyla could see the slender hand returning the tool to the pillow. With her other hand, the Grand Priestess picked an identical blade from an identical pillow set on her other side. Aiyla understood it was to be examined with the same piercing look.

It is not out of respect that one averts their eyes in the presence of She Who Hears. It is because in the Realm of Ishtar, the look of her Grand Priestess can, and does, kill those who dare through courage, foolery, or simple absentmindedness, to look. Kh'Zhameel faces that threat twice a day. All jobs in the service of Ishtar are honorable, but some are more lethal than others.

"*Khatach-ee!*" The priestess shrieked and in one swift motion grabbed both knives, raised her arms and buried each screaming edge in Aiyla's temples, left and right. A shout escaped Aiyla's throat but she remained seated. Warm wet pulses trickled down her cheeks. She stifled a sob, her fingers still stretched obediently in their proper position. Brow, nose, chin, air.

In the three moon-cycles that followed, a maiden-nurse reopened the wounds every day, and let the two crescents bleed for several minutes before applying salve and bandage. Once the daily visits stopped, the deep cuts were left to heal. The two curves remained: visible, throbbing, waiting.

Voices, remembrances of her own self, continue to flood her as time fizzles around her. A rite every four years in the making of the Grand Priestess, she now recalls her final one. The last rite of *Ital'oot*. The old one stepped down and Aiyla was no longer Aiyla. A new crowned Grand Priestess of Ishtar. The discharged one performed a last deed: she removed the massive golden head-piece from her own head, and placed it around Aiyla's bare head. An ornate thing with two thin horizontal gold crescents at the back of the head, just about touching each other. In the midst of each, a round blue speckled moonstone, peppered with greens, blacks, whites, perfectly smoothed, held in place by a filigreed half-sphere cupping it. The ornament attached to the head via two small serrated crescents, biting deep into the matching scars of her temples.

Once crowned, the new Grace of Ishtar carried the burden of hearing. Voices. Voices. Attending to the remembrances in devotion. She Who Hears had many other terrible roles as well, other names. One Who Sees The Guilty.

From that day, she slept face down on a specially made pillow, a hole at its center. It protected the innocents tending to her. There was also no other way to sleep with the head-piece on, and it was not to be taken off.

Lying face down at night was the only lull she knew from the weight of her crown, if that was really what it was. Her temples always bled lightly, her head always ached at the scars. The incessant pressure of the crown, the incessant demands of the voices.

The one who was once Aiyla, the one who replaced her predecessor 28 years ago, the one who four years later herself had to slice open the temples of a young farmer's girl of four who could charm snakes, that one is nearly done. The girl has come of Priestesshood age. A new cycle was about to begin. An endless cycle of the nameless ones before her joining her hands and the hands of the woman now climbing the ziggurat steps for the last time.

The one who was once Aiyla, whose own name she had long ago forgotten, remembers it. Her last remembrance. One not meant for the king through Kh'Zhameel's ears. Precious treasures she had to leave behind, now returned to her. She may step down.

She now knows: she was waiting, waiting in the darkness. For the self cannot be undone, only exiled. Tears trickle down, she longs for the simplest of joys – that of looking into someone else's eye to see reflected something other than terror. So many years since she last held such a gaze. The gently creased eyes of General Kh'Zhameel on the occasion of her last *ital'oot*, the Final Ascension.

He is still the messenger. Ishtar blessed his waning years. His creases deep, the dark skin reddened, always the easy smile on his face. They both have been bald a long long time. For twenty eight years he has listened to her remembrances, dawn and dusk. But no gentle pats on her head, and his eyes could not look at hers.

The future Grand Priestess awaits by the top of the steps now. The soon to be past Priestess motions her to come. The young woman kneels. The woman who is almost Aiyla drips the liquid into the other's eyes. The other shrieks but remains kneeling. That is a third use of the venom. Properly brewed in a method the voices shared with the Priestess only when the time came, it was made into a potion that gives eyes the power of a deathening. The power of a war goddess.

The two women lock eyes. It is her first time in 28 years to look and not kill. But there is no joy there, only honor, obedience, servitude. Still, there is a gentle bitter sweetness, for she knows this is the last of these she'll ever have.

Without shifting her gaze, almost Aiyla detaches the crown from her own temples and attaches it to her successor's. Slowly, gracefully, they rotate, exchanging seats. Eyes still locked. Without the crown, if that is really what it is, she hears a blessed silence. At last.

It is almost done. Aiyla covers her baldness with a fine chiffon cloth, dark. She ties a band around and tightens it. She circles her fingers around the gold fringes of two small blue pillows placed between herself and Ishtar's Grace, readying. The other one lifts the identical tools balanced atop each pillow. Not the gold blades of the first rite.

Smooth as grace itself, The Grand Priestess spikes the hot iron rods into Aiyla's eyes, and swiftly retracts them. The venom's gift cannot be undone, and there can only be One Who Sees The Guilty. Aiyla remains silent.

She can hear the hurried footsteps of two acolytes rushing to her side. They quickly bandage what used to be her eyes. They pull her up gently by her elbows and slowly walk her away.

Aiyla feels the wind blowing on her face and knows she's by the steps. Large warm hands greet her trembling ones. They gently prod open her palms, laying there a piece of what she knows must be candied ginger. Kh'Zhameel holds her left hand in his, his right hand drapes her right shoulder. Tears under the bandages, the salt burns. She will not see again, but o, the bliss of silence in her head. As they slowly make their way down the steps, she begins to hear herself for what feels like the very first time.