

INCARNATE

BETS DAVIES

CHAPTER ONE

Sunlight sluiced over Meryt's body. The soggy air made the subdued trammel of feet below her sound underwater. Only the corgeb ventured out at midday, slaves running errands. Few ailifs came out between noon and three. Itsel was Meryt's favorite time of day. Mistress Palain slept. Mistress Palain had sent breakfast back twice. She had had Meryt switch the book she read out loud thrice. Meryt's jaw ached. She forced her jaw lax. Mistress Palain owned her life, but while that old woman slept, Meryt would be damned if Mistress Palain had her thoughts.

Meryt settled against her dress and petticoats, a pleasant warmth protecting her from the heat of the roof tiles. She drifted back to last night's dreams. He had come again. She had smoothed fingers over his chest, the copper color of a cloudy dusk. Pulling away, he had stared at her with those eyes like the dark jade earrings Mistress Palain let her see sometimes. Meryt had woken up slimy between the thighs—what Mistress Palain called her “locked gate”.

Meryt had never been afraid of her dream friend. Mistress Palain hung a fear of corgeb men over Meryt's head, though in Meryt's earliest memories, her mother had told her a different story of who raped who. For all he was now stronger than her, her dream man had never given her a moment's qualm. Maybe because he had come to her early, so they had grown up together. She could not remember who had touched who first. It never got beyond a few caresses—enough to leave her short of breath when she woke.

“Mery! Mery!”

She couldn't help but smile at the sibilant murder of syllables. She clipped with the groomed consonants Mistress Palain had drilled into her: “Batchen. Call me Meryt!”

Batchen swung up from the window onto the roof. He wore only scuffed trousers. If only she had her brother's dove gray eyes and rusty hair, now peach fuzz over his scalp, she might pass for an ailif with her pale skin. But she had the most corgeb hair, corgeb eyes, corgeb body she could get. She unwound her black hair from a knot. One hand touched the corner of her eye with its folded lid. Her irises shone gold.

Meryt cuffed the boy on his shaved skull. “Why does mother insist on shaving your head? She didn't shave your sister's head, did she?” Meryt struggled petticoats over her long limbs, up her rounded rump.

“Sss.” Batchen wrinkled his lip. “You put on airs, veren. Pesté's your sis, too.”

“Veren? You brat.” Meryt laughed. She hadn't called Pesté by name because she'd forgotten it again. She had never been in lower house while her brother grew up. When Batchen was born she had been ten—around the time she had taken over sole care of Mistress Palain. He had to be ten himself by now.

Meryt lowered herself into the stifling attic. “What are you doing up here?”

“The Mistress calls for you.” Batchen popped in behind her.

“Witches be damned. Why didn't you tell me?” Meryt picked up her skirts. She prayed the Mistress wasn't feeling worse again. “Batchen, wait in case I need to send for help.”

He rolled his eyes and plunked into a chair he had no right to sit in. She settled her face into a smooth mask as she slid open Mistress Palain's ngosi wood door.

“At last. Where have you been?” The old woman's head was near lost among pillows.

Relief swept through Meryt. “I apologize, Mistress.” Meryt curtsied. “I must have drifted off. It's the heat.”

She glanced up at her mistress's face: ailif. Her wrinkled paper skin was as pale as a hiera moth. Her watery eyes blinked faded blue. Mistress Palain's head wobbled. “Nice to have a break in the rains. But you must be more attentive, Meryt. I rang and rang. A dirty little corgeb thing came in here.”

Meryt flicked her eyes to the maroon rug. Hate welled at the back of her tongue. Meryt was a dirty corgeb, no matter how she dressed or spoke. Her fingers twitched to smother Mistress Palain with one of those plump pillows. “What did you call me for, Mistress?”

“Oh, I wanted to see a bright thing on this dull day.” Mistress Palain waved her twig-boned hand. “Ah, no! The curls came out already?”

“Mistress, my hair doesn’t take curl.” Meryt tendered the edge from her voice.

“We shall see about that tomorrow.” The old woman clapped. “Now—divination.”

For Mistress Palain magic was a pocket hobby. For Meryt—a witch had been burned in Shella only two weeks ago. Meryt pulled down the deck from the corner shelf. Witches lived in the Alces jungle with the snakes they kept as consorts. They ate wayfarers. She swallowed. But the Inquisition found them among the corgeb everywhere.

“Shuffle.” Mistress Palain shooed Meryt onto her stool.

Meryt poured the cards from hand to hand. Candlesticks loomed over the carved music box Mistress Palain had brought from the ailif homeland, Alic, to the island of Oton when she was young. The box now plunked out “Lovers in the Nighttime” out of tune. Mistress Palain had let Meryt play with it when she was small.

“You’ve shuffled the pictures off, girl.” Mistress Palain grabbed the deck. She flipped three cards over in a row. A grinning skeleton rode a skeleton horse. Next to that a woman clothed only in a leaf placed over her gate stood next to a man with a leaf placed over—Meryt only knew the corgeb word her mother had told as a child: *cernta*. The last card held a seated woman with a headdress of rays.

“See!” Mistress Palain picked up the Empress. “You are someone special.”

The woman squinted at it through watery eyes. Meryt tried not to smile.

“And this?” Meryt touched the other cards. “I will fall in love with death?”

Mistress Palain frowned. “You know not to read the cards so literally. Death can mean a time of great change. You go through a time of great change. You fall in love. You come into your specialness.” Mistress Palain set down her card. “Or Death does represent someone who has seen death, someone you fall in love with. Yes. Maybe you are to marry an officer.”

“Mistress.” Painful laughter burbled.

“Not now.” Mistress Palain collected her cards. “When I die.”

“Oh, Mistress, you won’t—” She couldn’t say it. She could barely think it. Her mistress’s death loomed over Meryt’s life. Then Meryt’s life, too, would disappear.

“I will.” Mistress’s voice went hot. “I want you well set up when I do. You’re special.”

“Mistress,” Meryt’s voice hurt her throat, “I can never marry—”

“Stranger things happen, girl.” She stroked Meryt’s hair. “And you are special—”

“Knock, knock?” Mistress Dalaen’s voice caroled as the door swung open. Mistress Palain’s daughter flared her nostrils in Meryt’s direction. Behind her entered Master Fourol, Mistress Palain’s physician, on his spindly legs that stuck out from his baggy knee britches.

“What a surprise!” Mistress Palain opened her arms.

“What a surprise?” Mistress Dalaen’s voice was as weak as over milked tea, but scalding. “Mother. You have known we were coming for weeks. Mother, we talked about this.”

“We did?” Mistress Palain tucked her arms to her chest.

Meryt took the cards away with Mistress Dalaen’s eyes on her. She fidgeted in her ailif clothing. She squelched the urge to protect Mistress Palain. Meryt had herself to protect.

Mistress Dalaen minced over to her mother’s bedside. “We said I was coming for a special visit this time. We said if Antock would let me, you would come home with me.”

Meryt’s legs wobbled beneath her. Master Antock lived on a sugarcane plantation, near the Alces. Meryt’s family—Master Antock would have no need for a second household staff.

“Oh.” Mistress Palain crumpled. Then her blue eyes grew as clear as cut glass. “I never did like that Antock. He doesn’t treat you with respect. It’s like I’m always telling my Meryt—”

“Yes, mother.” Mistress Dalaen shot Master Fourol a look. “You were always very—positive about things. Come, and let Fourol lift you. We have a coach waiting outside, and another cart waiting for your things.” She pulled back the bedding to expose her mother’s frilled nightgown.

“That’s all right, dear. Meryt will carry me.” Mistress Palain peered around her daughter. “Run and get your new dress, darling, Meryt. We’re going on an adventure.”

“Meryt, stay!” The daughter whipped around.

Meryt’s toes dug into the carpet.

“We talked about this, too, Mother.” The daughter straightened Mistress Palain’s collar. “Meryt and the other slaves aren’t coming with us.”

Meryt put a hand to the bookcase before she fell. They were taking her Palain away. Piece by piece, she saw her life rip away till she stood barren—just another corgeb.

“The slaves stay here with your other things.” Mistress Dalaen’s voice pounded into Meryt’s brain. “I have plenty of slaves to take care of you.”

Master Fourol smiled with too many yellow teeth. “Yes, Meryt—”

“Oh, hush!” Mistress Palain flopped her arms at Master Fourol. “I don’t like him. He told me I couldn’t teach Meryt to speak well. We showed him. I can’t go without Meryt. You have savage corgeb.”

“Mother.” Mistress Dalaen mottled red. “Meryt is a corgeb.”

“Oh, but she’s not like the rest.” Mistress Palain crooked her finger to Meryt. “Not my Meryt. She’s different. Special. I knew the instant I saw her.”

Meryt knelt beside Mistress Palain.

“I don’t need another slave!” Mistress Dalaen shrilled like a tasi bird. “Especially not a Meryt. I don’t need a little corgeb witch who thinks above her station.”

Anger jerked Meryt from her numb state.

“Meryt is special. Do you hear me? Special.” Mistress Palain squeezed Meryt’s hand. “But what will we do with her if we don’t take her with us?”

Master Fourol leaned on the bedpost. “We will find her a good home.”

With her squinting eyes, Mistress Palain leveled the man. “If she has to move, anyway, we might as well take her with us.” “She’ll stay here.” Mistress Dalaen slammed brushes out of the bedside table. “She’ll run the house while you are away.”

Master Fourol hid his smile behind one hairy hand. Meryt swayed to keep to her knees. Mistress Palain’s face had gone blurred with that wandering look she got. “Yes. Let her stay.” Mistress Palain’s words slurred. “She can run the house by herself with the slaves to help. We can come and visit that way, right, Meryt?”

Mistress Dalaen shot Meryt a stare. Master Fourol cleared his throat. Meryt’s throat stuck. In a few years, Mistress Palain would be dead, and Mistress Dalaen would inherit Meryt. At least being sold, Meryt had a chance.

“Now, here we go.” Master Fourol lifted Mistress Palain. He carried her to the door with Mistress Dalaen traipsing in his wake.

“Be good, Meryt. Don’t let those corgeb overrun you,” Mistress Palain called. “And you are special, remember.”

The door shooshed shut behind them to leave Meryt alone in the room that had framed her life. She followed the bindings of the books she had read to Mistress Palain everyday. The curling rods sat in their metal hedgehog.

She could run. She squelched the thought. Alone, on foot, with no knowledge of safe haven or hide out, she would be fodder. She fought despair. She had been a good slave. She would find a good home. If not—a better chance to escape would come. She touched the Palain swan crest tattooed on her left wrist. Meryt opened the music box to listen one last time to the off key twang singing like a drunken bird while she waited for the slave traders to come.

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Rain leaked through the wagon's cracks. Droplets sloshed into the slop buckets to spray vile liquid. The other corgebs slept in the shadow filled slave traders' vehicle. Numbing water gushed from the leaky roof down Meryt's front. She gasped upright. The wagon was stuck in the mud again. The ailifs had had the slaves in and out, trying to unstick it, but night had come. The traders locked the corgebs in, muttering about kira cats and witches.

Meryt leaned her head against the wet wall. They were two days out of Eran, and away from Mistress Palain's house, heading for Governor Geruin's palace. Her eyes drifted shut as the slave auction came over her again. She had been shoved into a wooden stall. Her mother had been crushed in with Meryt's little sister. Her mother soothed Pesté, who had a large gourd of a shaved head. Meryt had gone stiff at this strange child's tears. Meryt had peeked out of the curtain. At last, Batchen had stood on the block, his chest puffed out, but his mouth sagging like a frog's. The bidding had fallen fast. She prayed the competition had meant he was valued.

She had grown accustomed to gloom when their sheet was ripped away. A square faced ailif jerked her to the block by one arm. She had promised herself she would not cry. She was special. Nothing could strip her of her humanity. But she had expected to be stripped.

Meryt rubbed her sore arms in their shackles. She pressed her hands to her eyes and listened to the rain.

"Two thousand." A tremoring male voice had called. "Two thousand for her."

The gavel had slammed. As the chains had clamped, her mother and sister had stuck together like a two headed creature. When Meryt had trudged to the lopsided wagon, she had heard the man with the trembling voice. "For Governor Geruin." He had laughed. "That man goes through slaves so quickly, a gift doesn't take much thought."

The manacles bit. The governor had ruled the province of Oton for as long as Mistress Palain knew. He was a prince, exiled for "outlandish living". His exile had not stopped him. The only worse fate for a slave was to be sold off island. Even Mistress Palain whispered a demon held Governor Geruin's soul on a string. He had put the Deathless Ones at the Inquisition's head. Meryt shook. Deathless Ones—Mistress Palain barely spoke of the warriors.

Something in the Alces jungle screamed like a babe being strangled. And the governor had chosen to put his palace—the head of Oton's trade shore island—in the inland, witch infested Alces.

Her restless hands rattled her chains. If Meryt were a witch, she would be out of this cramped wagon. No manacles would encircle her wrists. She would frighten the ailifs. These wilds would welcome her. She would drip power.

Near the corner of the wagon, something swayed. Meryt inched towards it, holding her chains before her. A white stalk gleamed in the low light. Meryt squinted. A dark flower with voluptuous petals. The only plants she had ever heard of with white stalks were witch vines, but the Inquisition had burned them all. A smoky smell cleaned out her skull. Meryt crouched over the little plant, and dreamed.

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K'tral swiped a flower from one of the quierta vines that lined the Temple path. He held the black flower to his face. His heart still hummed with the Vekna jungle's tune. He had been away from the Temple nine days. He had almost found Meren. Even as he neared the Temple, he smiled. Meren drew closer. He could not remember a time when he had not been able to feel Her. But She had always been distant. Now, She moved. Up ahead of him, Llen Leldir weeded the quiertas. K'tral lit in a grin.

"Merdi, friend." He nudged Leldir.

Leldir's leg flashed out, swiping beneath K'tral. K'tral jumped it.

"Someday you will hurt someone—someone you like." K'tral laughed.

Leldir sat up with a smile. "Who says I like you? You look like vek. I don't envy you Llen Seti's wrath. Better give me that bow."

K'tral's laughter hiccupped to a halt. Reality set in. He handed his bow, quiver, and tem'e'a blade to Leldir. "You should have come with me."

Leldir rubbed the slight fuzz across his scalp. "And face Llen Seti for corrupting you?"

The purring left K'tral's muscles. For once he could scrub stubble across his own scalp. He was a mess. He crouched. "You've done it before."

“And I learn.” Leldir punched him. “Was it worth it?”

K'tral swallowed, but managed a nod.

“Go. None of us has slept since you left. Meet your fate, Oh Pure One.”

“If I am so—”

“Save your arguments for Llen Seti.” Leldir tossed him a tuber.

K'tral bit into the rich plant as he backed down the walk. “I will argue this time.”

“Sure,” Leldir laughed, “and your veins run vek.”

K'tral's veins could no more be vek than the sun could rise in the west. He mounted the Temple steps. Which was about as much chance as he had with arguing his way out of this. He trod through the crumbling stone halls with their familiar carvings. Kata slithered into his path and he picked her up. She flickered her forked tongue at him. He stuck his tongue out.

“Cer K'tral.”

Llen Seti's voice froze K'tral's blood. She stood by the stairs to his room. Her small, pear shaped body quivered. She squinted her raisin eyes at him.

“Yes, Llen Seti?” He put on his best Cer face.

“Get to your room.” Her knobby hand shot out.

K'tral near ran down the steps to the sunken womb where he had grown up. Snakes contorted from his path. From the altar alcove, Meren smiled at Cer the Babe in Her arms.

“Where have you been?” Llen Seti's voice bit the back of his neck.

K'tral clutched Kata to his chest. “The Vekna.”

“Cer K'tral.” Her voice sang like the lullabies she murmured to him as a child. “You must be above this foolishness. You let the worst of your ceru get the better of you—these mannish, silly escapades.” Her hands clamped on his shoulders. “You know you must stay safe. Her arrival is imminent. What would She do if you died—or were polluted, Pure One?”

K'tral jerked from her grasp. He was squeezing Kata. He knelt to release her among her brothers and sisters, and to give himself time to pull his lips from a thin line.

“You are the Pure One.” Llen Seti folded her arms. “You are all that is Innocent. You are the Child and the Consort. You are ceru. You must keep yourself pure for Her.”

K'tral bent his head under the words older than the oldest lullaby. There were other tales. He had other names. But he was trapped in this temple with the snakes.

“You must think what Meren would want.” Llen Seti half lidded her eyes.

K'tral's rebellion marinated into shame.

Llen Seti's voice slid. “I think it would be wise if you purified, don't you?”

K'tral's shoulders folded.

“I think twelve hours spent in meditation and fasting before Yourself and Meren would be wise, don't you?” Llen Seti touched his cheek. “And get cleaned up. Chuté, boy.” Llen Seti removed her hand with a pat and walked away.

Twelve hours in meditation. His head ached. He knelt down before the ochre stone figure of Cer. Centering his eyes on the jade bits that made the statue's eyes, he pulled his essence together. Not for the first time, he wondered if Llen Seti had had the bits of jade set as eyes after K'tral had been born. His face was not so dissimilar from the stone God's. The incarnates of Cer and Meren were born with new flesh forms each time, but he found himself tracing the statue despite himself. The angular cheekbones were the same. He liked to think they had the same crooked smiles. K'tral ran a hand down his muscled stomach. Since he had turned sixteen two years ago, all the training Llen Seti had him perform finally paid off. Now he loomed over Leldir. K'tral made a fit consort. At least, Meren thought so.

K'tral could not remember a time he had not dreamed of Meren—like he had always been able to feel Her. He had never told anyone. Llen Seti was the head llen, and all things concerning religion belonged to her, and Leldir was his one friend. But Meren was his. He listened next to his own heart—a second heartbeat, getting closer.

The overripe rim of the morning sun pierced Meryt's eyes when the wagon opened. A fine rain fell. All around her, corgebs groaned to their feet. A woman about Meryt's mother's age, shaped like an egg, jostled Meryt. Meryt stuck to the floor.

"Move along." A voice boomed.

Meryt struggled out of the wagon. A purple skinned paw latched onto her arm. "This one is marked for presentation." A sausage finger motioned to a slave trader. A key inserted into her manacles. They fell. Meryt touched her blistered skin.

"Don't lose this, girl." The brown chest fitted a metal band to her wrist. "We'll both be sorry if you do. You don't want to make me sorry."

Meryt nodded to the gold buttons down the front of the chest. "Presentation". Maybe because she was a gift.

"Bertu!" The chest shouted.

A woman made of bone stood with the slaves Meryt had come in with. Even the woman's skin looked to be made of old, yellowed bone. She wore a rough gray dress.

"Bertu, take this one as well." The chest motioned to Meryt. "She might as well do something useful until she is presented. Remember, she is to be presented."

"Yes, Master." Bertu's dark eyes narrowed on Meryt. "Come with me."

Meryt stumbled across the broken tiles of the courtyard. One hand fidgeted her new band, which cut into the tender flesh so recently freed.

"Now I am Household Woman." Bertu did not look at them as she spoke. She swerved a group of horses clattering through the vast courtyard. "Not Household Mistress. That is an ailif woman. But you will get your commands from me."

At Meryt's feet, tiles hinted of red and white glaze. She walked towards a building that stretched as far as she could see. It was made out of crumbling, creamy brown stone. Some of it had been patched with slightly darker bricks. Windows and doorways had been filled in at certain points and knocked out at others. Carvings had been chipped out.

"I run lower house." Bertu opened a small door. "We also clean upper house. But no waiting on the ailifs. They buy their own slaves for that."

Meryt stepped into the steeped smell of bassa roasting. Pots clanged. One flew by as a burly woman threw it to a boy with a snub nose. The boy caught the pot with a grin that made Meryt's heart fish—so like Batchen. Bertu stepped into the whirlwind of activity. "Sss, I don't have time for any of you."

Meryt choked on a giggle. As if this was what Meryt wanted.

"Presentation girl." Bertu's long finger leveled. "What is your name?"

"Meryt?" Meryt leaned against the door.

"Meryt, this is—" Bertu's long finger crooked— "Yliss, get over here." A girl made of sticks and straws swerved to Bertu's side. "Meryt, this is Yliss. Yliss will watch over you until you are presented."

Meryt dodged through the kitchen to Yliss, who balanced a huge and cluttered tray on her shoulder. Yliss blew hair the color of old parchment out of her face. "Chuté, let me set this down." She spoke in a raspy voice. She settled her tray on a great stone block running the length of the room. "I'm Yliss and—"

"Everyone get your new one their grays." Bertu swelled her voice.

"—and we'd better get you some new clothes." Yliss scrunched up eyes that were set off kilter—one a hair's breath higher and tilted. They were an evening sky shade.

Corgebs did not have blond hair. Blue eyes were unheard of. Meryt could hear her mother's careful words years before as her mother tried not to frighten Meryt, yet—stop it.

"This way." Yliss scampered off.

Once out of the kitchen the air cooled. Meryt had to pick up her skirts to race after Yliss.

"It's not so bad. You'll see. I've lived here my whole life."

Meryt struggled not to ask how Yliss looked like that. She didn't want to know.

"Chuté, girl, you'll have your pick of a man," Yliss laughed.

"Yliss," Meryt shook her head, "I'm not—"

“Sss. Had to leave yours?” Yliss raised her eyebrows.

“No.” Never had her small life felt so small. “I took care of my mistress.”

With a grin, Yliss stopped. “You never snuck to lower house to loiter till some beautiful corgeb was sent by on an errand? Vatam, you are strange. You’ll have no trouble here and—”

This was the worst day of Meryt’s life and she was making small talk about men. “I don’t want a man.”

Yliss punched her. “Not much else for fun here. You’ll be a mother in a year.”

Never. Never a mother to a slave. “I don’t want a child.”

Yliss’s smile wiped. “You are a woman. What else makes you valuable?”

Meryt lowered her head. She used to be valuable because she was Meryt.

Yliss touched her shoulder. “Decide on your own man before the ailifs—or a slave—does it for you.”

Meryt pressed a hand into the wall to keep herself standing. This was all she had. If she got advice—she forced a smile. “You think I can get a good man?”

“Chuté.” Yliss set a hand to Meryt’s cheek. “Have you never seen yourself or are you looking for compliments?”

“Both.” Meryt tried a laugh.

“You’ll be fine.” Yliss hesitated. “You do know even with a corgeb man that an ailif could—”

Meryt looked away. “Yes.” But she couldn’t stand to hear it.

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The harsh waters slogged in the stone troughs. Acrid foam splashed Meryt as she dragged her sheet across the grooves one more time. Her wrists burned. Her arms ached. Everything ached.

“The dry season’s better.” Yliss jostled her with an elbow. “Then we can wash outside.”

Sweating in the sun—Meryt wrinkled her nose at the gray room—probably was better than this. Even all the women were gray—including Meryt—in their rough dresses. Meryt stole a glance at Yliss working beside her. She must be two or three years younger than Meryt.

“Burra, my man’s a lazy man,” a voice sang out as slow and low as treacle.

A voice called out, “it took you this long to figure that out?”

The singing rolled on. “He never does a thing / So Master sent him to farm the lands / Now all I do is sing.”

Laughter bounced. Meryt nudged Yliss. “What’s she singing about?”

“Mm? Her man was lazy so her master made him a field slave.” Yliss gave a wrinkle nosed grin. “Now he must live in the field huts and she is alone—so she sings.”

“Oh.” Meryt flushed. The wristband chafed. Her stomach rebelled, unable to take on any more information she couldn’t stand, but her tongue went ahead. “What is ‘presentation’?”

Yliss’s hands slowed. “It means someone singled you out—to be presented to the governor so that he can choose your placement himself.” Yliss’s voice petered out. “It can be good.”

Meryt examined her calm insides. They rejected further suggestion of trauma, and she was sick of her life going to Artsamov without at least seeing who was doing it.

“Burra, my man’s a cheating man,

He’s been in every bed around,

He has so many children,

Some he’s lost—can’t be found.”

“Good.” Meryt’s strong voice was odd in her own ears. “I look forward to seeing the governor of Oton.”

“Vatam.” Yliss jerked. “You are a—an odd one. Brave Meryt, you will get a good placement. You are—special.”

Meryt laughed till her knees gave way.