

Sumerian Legend of Lilitu

Translated by Charles Alexander Moffat from an ancient Hebrew version

Before the stars were born
Before people built great cities
The great mountain Atlen shook
And bled fiery blood
As it gave birth to Lilitu

The land all around burned
Many animals and people died
When Lilitu opened her eyes
Lilitu saw the ashes of her birth
And wept tears like rain

Lilitu's tears became rivers and streams
Flowers grew where Lilitu walked
Trees grew where Lilitu sat
The ashes became fertile soil
And an orchard became Lilitu's home

In Lilitu's orchard many animals are
People came to live in paradise
Lilitu gave them grain and taught them to harvest
Lilitu made bread and beer
The people rejoiced, ate and drank

One day a great prince came to the land of Atlen
He spied Lilitu and wooed her
But Lilitu spurned and rejected him
The great prince became very angry
He spied two lions and killed them both

Lilitu wept for the lions
She cradled their heads in her arms
The lions awoke to her tears
The lions licked away her tears and became strong
They became Lilitu's loyal friends

The great prince saw this
And again he wooed Lilitu
But Lilitu became a bird
She flew away from him
Angry, the prince began hunting birds

Lilitu saw this and was upset
To spite the prince she spat at him
And mated with a serpent
Lilitu gave birth very quickly
Her child was like no other

The child had six arms
The child had a serpent's tail
The child was very strong
Lilitu called the child a marilitu
The Marilitu attacked the great prince

The great prince and the marilitu fought
They fought day and night
For night after night
And day after day
But neither could win the fight

Lilitu saw this and mated again
Another marilitu was born
And another and another
Two hundred and sixteen were born
In fear the great prince ran away

The people of the orchard rejoiced
The marilitus farmed the land
The marilitus protected the people
But the great prince swore vengeance
He cursed the mountain Atlen and its land

Atlen became angry at this curse
The mountain and the land shook
Atlen shook and bled and cried
Its fiery blood made fires
And its tears made floods

Afraid Lilitu turned into a great bird
She grasped people in her feet
She carried animals on her back
The marilitu's and the lions carried people too
Together they fled the land of Atlen

Lilitu went west and east
Lilitu went north and south
Finally she came to dry land
The people thanked Lilitu greatly
The people built statues in her honour

Lilitu wept for her lost home
Her tears formed two rivers
The rivers joined together
They flowed into the ocean
The people grew grain by the river

The people grew great orchards
They built buildings and towers of stone
The people grew healthy and the land rich
Merchants from far places travelled there
News of the wealth of the land grew

The great prince heard of the land
He sent his heralds to inquire of its lady
But Lilitu fed his heralds to her lions
The great prince sent an army
But the marilitus destroyed his army

Finally the great prince went
When he saw the beautiful orchards
When he saw the six-armed marilitus
The great prince knew the lady was Lilitu
In fear he disguised himself as a woman

The great prince went to Lilitu's temple
His disguise fooled the people
But the lions knew his scent
The two lions warned Lilitu
So Lilitu prepared a trap

Lilitu summoned thirty-six young men
She filled a hall with thirty-six silver platters
She ordered thirty-six beasts slaughtered
At last she was ready
She invited the people to the feast

People came from all over the land
The great prince came too
The great prince arrived in disguise
But Lilitu knew him eagerly
She welcomed him as an honoured guest

The great prince accepted her hospitality
He sat before all the people
The thirty-six young men were brought forth
"Please choose a man," Lilitu commanded
Not wanting to be rude the great prince chose one

Lilitu bade the great prince to sit beside the young man
The silver platters were brought forth
The people feasted on the meat of thirty-six beasts
Great gifts were brought forth
Lilitu gave the gifts to the great prince

Confused the great prince accepted
Then the feast was finally over
Curious, the great prince questioned Lilitu
"Do you always give such grand gifts to strangers?"
"Only when someone is married," Lilitu answered

Realizing what had happened the great prince became angry
He ripped off his disguise
He drew his sword and his dagger
"Why have you made me marry this man?" he demanded
"Because you can never marry me," Lilitu answered

Enraged the great prince attacked Lilitu
The two fought endlessly for Lilitu was very strong
Whenever the prince would get too bold
Lilitu would change into a bird
The great prince fell to the ground and wept in despair

The great prince professed his love
He promised that he would never quit
He prepared to cut his own throat
Finally Lilitu grew tired of this game
She felt pity for the great prince

"I will grant you one kiss," Lilitu declared
Desperate the great prince accepted
The moment the great prince's kiss had been dealt
His body flooded with life and then death
So great was the pleasure of one kiss that he died

Lilitu wept for the great prince
But the great prince remained dead
Saddened Lilitu knew she could never love
No mortal man could taste her kiss and live
Her tears brought life, but her kiss brought death