



TEMPLE OF TIME SERIES: Book 1

FORBIDDEN

By

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Chapter 1

To be summoned to the Verbot Doma was a serious matter. Zareen tried to think of any infraction she'd committed, any task she'd omitted to perform. Perhaps it had to do with her attending too frequent sword practices and too few needlework sessions. The truth was her skill with a sword far surpassed her skill with a needle.

Before entering the Doma's room, Zareen paused to command serenity to settle over her. Lately that art had become more and more difficult. For some reason she couldn't identify, she'd been restless of late. True, she took part in the forays into the city where the senior virgins ventured, always in pairs, to do what they could for the poor and ill. This meant she wasn't always confined to the Verbot Temple. Could it be these forays had whetted her appetite for-what? Using her warrior skills? But the Virgin warriors were strictly for defense and, as Zareen well knew, her

Temple hadn't been under attack for more than the twenty years she had lived.

Inside the room, she saw the Doma seated on a low hassock beside the reflecting pool, an empty stool beside her. Senior virgins were not required to bow their heads to the Verbot Doma, as juniors and acolytes were. Today, though, it was difficult to remember not to.

"Ah, Zareen," the Doma said. "Come you and sit beside me."

Zareen obeyed.

After a silence, the Doma asked, "What see you in the pool?"

She'd never been asked this before. Zareen leaned forward, peering intently, hoping to scry something of importance, but finally had to admit, "I see only the water reflecting me."

"Close your eyes. Now what see you?"

First there was nothing but darkness behind her lids. Zareen waited, not trying to grasp at the limited magic she possessed. Either a vision would come or not, it couldn't be forced.

After a time, she whispered, "I see the moons in the night sky. Both moons."

The Doma sighed. "It is as I feared. Open your eyes, child."

Zareen blinked at her. "But this is only the twelfth year. The moons will not appear together until next year."

"Tell me what will happen then."

Without the Starlight Crescent to prevent evil, Zareen knew, the

entire planet of Tonapa might be rent asunder during two moon night. Mizpa, the city where she lived, and all in it might perish. The simple verse she'd learned as a child slipped into her head and, without thinking, she chanted the words:

“When the two moons sail the night
Starlight Crescent shining bright
Keeps the Dark away from Light.”

No sooner were the words out of her mouth than she felt like a childish fool. The Crescent had been stolen from the top of Star Tower last year, none knew how, but it was gone. The entire kingdom had been searched to no avail.

"We have lost our talisman," she said to the Doma. "I do not know what will happen."

"I have learned from my reflection pool where the talisman is and, while men rush hither and thither with no direction, I have been studying the Book of Secrets." The Doma gazed into her eyes. "I have chosen and the tribunal agrees."

Not understanding, Zareen tried not to stare at her.

The Doma rose, and Zareen hastily followed suit. One didn't remain seated if the Doma was not.

"I found no explanation for two-moon night arriving a year early," the Doma said, "but I did learn how the Crescent may be recovered from its hiding place within the Temple of Time."

Zareen drew in her breath. Those who entered that forbidding temple almost never came out.

"I know what you've heard about the Temple of Time," the Doma said, "but the Book says a virgin may enter and return if certain precautions are observed. You are our Chosen One."

A flash of excitement roiled Zareen's blood, followed by a pinch of dismay. She'd longed for an adventure, to actually put to use the skills she'd learned. But brave the Temple of Time?

"I have dreamed that within the Temple there is a tower on an island in a lake," the Doma continued. "The twisted wizard who stole the Crescent hid it in this tower. You must search for our talisman there and return with it, being very careful not to run afoul of this evil man. For he is still inside, since he can't ever return from the Temple of Time."

Zareen's head whirled. The Doma always dreamed true. But how could there be an island within the Temple of Time? With a tower? Where the evil wizard might lurk? Before she could utter any of the questions that roiled in her mind, the Doma dismissed her.

Over the next few days Zareen was sequestered, visited by one or another of the Wise Women. She learned she must go armed with her sword and boot dagger, plus various vials and powders to discourage possible attackers. She could defend herself, wound the menace if necessary, but on no account must she take the life of a sentient being during her travels. Nor could she take any food or drink except what she carried in with her. If she

accepted anything from anyone, except for the Crescent, which did not belong there, she would never be able to leave the Temple of Time.

The Doma, in her final lecture, made it clear that "anything" included a consummated mating, since women receive a portion of a man's essence during their joining. Within the Temple of Time, no male would be allowed to take her by force, so she would have to consent to the act to endanger herself.

"But I am a Verbot Virgin," Zareen protested.

The Doma sent her a stern look. "Even *we* may be tempted."

Zareen remained silent, even though she was sure she could never be tempted by a man bent on seduction. As for eating and drinking only what she brought in with her, that would be a simple matter since she was accustomed to fasting. With her sword and dagger, the deterrent vials, powders, amulets and her own small magics, she was confident of success. She would bring back the stolen Starlight Crescent and save her people.

"You must understand," the Doma said, "that the inside of the Temple of Time is not anything like our own temples and towers. It was built by unknown architects in ancient days. The Book of Secrets, also handed down from before our time, warns that the interior of that mysterious Temple can be in or out of doors and may not resemble any terrain seen on our world. There may even be doors or gates within that lead to lands other than Tonapa. Be prepared for this."

Other lands than Tonapa? How was that possible?

As if aware of the question in Zareen's mind the Doma added, "Though this seems strange to all of us, what is written in the Book of Secrets is true, even if we do not completely understand the hows or whys. Just as we do not and may never understand the Temple of Time."

Zareen nodded, remembering a day years before she'd been tested for a possible Verbot acolyte. That day she and Vrin, both no more than nine years, had accepted a playmate's dare and ran up the steps of the Temple of Time to peer into always open entrance. Naught could be seen of the interior except a frightening pall of darkness, and they scampered down faster than they'd climbed up. Even brave Vrin, the boy she'd decided would be her mate when they grew up, had been pale and shaken.

For a second she allowed herself to think of Vrin. She hoped he'd found a mate who suited him far better than she would have. A Verbot Virgin's vow prevented her from being the mate of any man.

When the day came for Zareen to begin her journey, the Doma took her hand and said, "Because you are the purest among us, pure as water from the clouds, yet with the soul of a warrior, we have selected you as the Chosen One. Bringing back the Starlight Crescent will endear you to the hearts of all the people forever."

Confident though Zareen had felt up until then, doubts assailed her after she left the group of her associates and companions assembled to see her off. Accompanied only by one acolyte, she set off for the Temple of Time, sword in its scabbard, dagger in its boot sheath, the container of vials,

powders and amulets in a pack on her back that was also filled with food, water, and a blanket. She wore her warrior garb, tunic and pants, far different than her usual white gown or hooded robe, though a robe and the slippers that went with it was in the pack.

What was waiting for her behind the darkness of the entrance? Would she succeed?

She summoned up enough serenity to dampen doubt and, by the time they reached her goal, she was able to climb the Temple of Time steps without hesitation. At the top, she glanced back and the white-clad acolyte waved. This one or another would wait here every day until her return, she knew.

Facing forward, hand on the hilt of her sword, she marched through the dark pall of the entrance, surprised to find it intangible. Pausing, she looking back and saw a shimmering veil rather than a black curtain separated her Mizpa. Then she faced forward and took in her surroundings.

No halls or corridors. No walls, floor, or roof. She stood on a rough path that led through a small grassy meadow toward a nearby woods. Though the morning on the other side of the entrance had been overcast, here the sun, much the same as Tonapa's sun, was lowering in a cloudless sky. Refusing to be daunted, Zareen assessed the path, saw no traps or obvious obstacles and set off, aware she might have to camp for the night since there were no dwellings in sight.

As she neared the woods, she noticed wooden planks had been set

across the banks of a stream to form a rude bridge. About to set foot on it, she stopped abruptly, an admonition of her old warrior grandfather's echoing in her head. *In strange places, caution saves lives.* After living in the city for many years, she'd almost forgotten unconsecrated bridges could be dangerous.

Removing the dagger from her boot, she tapped its hilt three times on a board and chanted:

“Whatever under the bridge doth dwell
By my dagger obey its spell.”

Dagger in hand, she marched across the plank bridge, on the alert for attack, turning to look when something splashed in the water to her left. A troll's ugly head rose above the water, glaring at her. She raised the dagger, point upward, and the troll submerged. She was safely across.

More wary, now, she paused before entering the woods. Though the path apparently continued on through the trees, Zareen told herself she couldn't be certain of anything. But, since the woods stretched out in both directions as far as she could see, there seemed no way around them. She glanced up at the sun. If she hurried, she might have a chance to get through to open country before dark.

She slid the dagger back into its sheath and, hand once more on her sword hilt, stepped into the shade beneath the trees, a species she didn't recognize, the branches beginning high on the huge trunks. While they didn't seem threatening, their dense canopy of leaves all but eliminated

undergrowth. On and on she trudged in the gloom under the trees and, when it gradually became even darker she knew night would find her still in this woods. She began to look for a break in the trees, or a limb low enough for her to pull herself up onto.

A slight easing of the gathering gloom gave her hope for a clearing. She quickened her pace and soon came to an area with no large trees. In its midst, the ruins of a building lay scattered, vines clothing the large stones. Saplings and unfamiliar bushes grew between these stones. A small portion of the base still stood some ten feet or more above the ground. Since it rose unevenly, Zareen was able to scramble up to the top, which was free of growth and spacious and flat enough to stretch out on. Maybe not entirely safe, but high enough to be somewhat protected.

Sitting there, she opened her pack and ate sparingly, using only enough water to ease the food down. Though accustomed to being solitary, as they all were in their cubicles in the city, she felt a different kind of aloneness here in this forest of alien trees. She might find some sparse comfort atop this ruin, but the place was definitely not a comfortable spot, perhaps not even a good place to be. It had an air of desolation that reminded her of graveyards.

"Stop it," she muttered aloud. "Next you'll be imagining you've invaded the home of one of those who cannot die, a blood-taker, in one of those tales to scare children." She didn't like hearing how her voice seemed to echo around the clearing.

Because she needed rest, she finally wrapped herself in the blanket and, propped up on the backpack, stretched out on the stones. When she began to doze, she jerked awake again and again until finally she slept.

When she began to dream that something beckoned her, the beckoning set off an internal alarm that woke her. She opened her eyes. Overhead a waxing moon lowered a shroud of silver, covering the clearing with an eerie beauty. Not moving, Zareen tried to home in on the source of the beckoning. To her left, yes. Slowly, cautiously, she turned her head to look, then sat erect abruptly. A tall man, elegantly dressed in black, stood on one of the stones, staring up at her.

"I trust you are comfortable." His voice was low and melodic.

"Who are you?" she demanded, sitting up, apprehension thundering in her blood.

"I might ask the same of you, since this is my territory."

"I'm a traveler, passing through." She tried in vain to block the allure that surrounded her, much as the moonlight did, only far more compelling. His allure.

"Since you travel in my territory, it will not be necessary for me to ask permission to join you in your temporary abode." He raised his arms to either side of him, revealing that he wore a black cape, lined with what she believed to be crimson, though it was difficult to be sure in the moon's leaching light..

Before she could protest, he was seated beside her. She tensed,

realizing a sword or dagger would not be effective against a man who could levitate as he had. Levitation was beyond her limited powers. Worse, she feared she knew who he was. What he was.

"I shan't harm you beyond your toleration," he murmured.

A strange statement for anyone to make, but he certainly wasn't just anyone. He belonged in the old tales, not here in person..

"I cannot be taken by force," she warned.

He smiled and took her hand in his, running his index finger along each of her fingers, pausing in the web between her fingers, then stroking her palm.

Bemused at how wonderful his touch felt, she didn't pull her hand free for far too long a time.

"You liked that," he said softly.

To deny it would be a lie, one she wished she could tell. She folded her hands together to prevent any repeat.

He chuckled and a moment later, his fingers caressed her face.

She refused to show cowardice by flinching away, hoping this time she'd find the touch of his hand repulsive. Instead, she found herself leaning her cheek against his hand, relishing the caress. Which would not do. With an effort, she eased away.

"Your skin is soft," he murmured. "Made for caressing. His hand moved to her hair. Tendrils had escaped from the long braid she coiled up onto to her head and he rubbed them between his fingers. "Lovely golden

hair, as well. A true beauty."

Zareen told herself it was impossible for her hair to have any feeling, but then where did the pleasing shiver along her spine come from?

"You must not touch me," she managed to say. "I am a Verbot Virgin."

"Why shouldn't virgins enjoy caresses?"

She'd never been deliberately touched by a man after she became an acolyte at eleven. Not often by a woman either, because touching was not encouraged. She wished he would go away.

He stroked her cheek again, running his hand slowly down to her neck where his fingers dipped under her shirt. Her shiver had nothing to do with distaste and everything to do with wanting more.

"Will you tell me your name?" His whisper was as compelling as his speech.

"No." Her voice was hardly audible, as she fought a strong desire to lean into him, to feel his arms close around her.

Her mind became muzzy, thwarting her attempts to remember the rhyme that she and Vrin used to chant, the rhyme from the blood-taker tales.

His lips touched her temple, easing along her cheek toward her neck. Her body tingled with strange desires. She wanted more, wanted his lips on hers, his hands touching and touching and touching her.

Words forced their way into her mind. *Allure, you are under the spell of the blood-taker's allure. Your desire comes from that, fomented by the*

spell. You are a warrior, not a foolish maiden. As a warrior, you desire nothing.

How could she free herself from his spell?

"No fairer maiden exists on land or sea," he murmured. "You shall be mine."

As his mouth came closer and closer to her neck, "Yes," was trembling on her traitorous lips when what he'd said got through the muzziness.

Land or sea. Sea.

The old chant burst from her.

"Blood-taker, blood-taker, don't bite me

Go find another across the sea

If you don't stop, I have the key

Garlic I shall thrust at thee."

Zareen wrenched away from him, reached into the special pocket of her pack, brought out the vial she knew was the right one by touch. Unstopping it, she flung the oil of garlic at him.

Before she could blink her eyes, he vanished.

She waited apprehensively but he didn't return. After a time she rolled up her blanket, thrust it into the pack and climbed down to the ground. Night travel might be dangerous, but she was not staying in this--this... At that moment she realized the ruins must be those of a sepulcher where the blood-taker had been buried who knew how long ago. His territory, indeed.

She shuddered, donned her pack and sought the path.

Enough moonlight leaked through the canopy to show her the way, though she made slow progress. As she walked she asked herself how she could have allowed herself to enjoy the caress of a blood-taker. A sworn Verbot Virgin should not have felt even a flicker of desire, so why had she? The tales warned of the fatal allure of such creatures, true. Still, she should not have been caught.

I will never let down my guard again, she vowed. No matter what the Temple of Time confronts me with--what creature, what man.

"I *will* remain a virgin!" she cried defiantly.

A sound froze her in her tracks, but when it was not repeated, she shrugged and went on. She must have imagined she'd heard laughter.

Chapter 2

Though she was determined not to be afraid, Zareen's passage in the dark among the great trees was anything but reassuring. A distant howl chilled her blood. She had no knowledge of what wild animals might be hunting this night. Did volans run here in packs as they did on Tonapa? Though her grandfather had admitted volans might menace humans, he insisted that, under normal circumstances, a volan did not consider a human as prey. Who knew, though, what normal circumstances might be in this woods? Or anywhere in the Temple of Time.

The woods went on and on-were they endless? Eventually a ray of moonlight leaking through the thick overhead canopy showed her a hollow trunk of a still-standing tree. Exhausted, she wedged herself into it and fell into an exhausted sleep standing up, with her hand on her sword hilt.

She roused to a chittering above her and sunlight sneaking meager rays through the branches. She eased from the hollow of the tree somewhat rested and also somewhat stiff. The noise above her head, she saw, came from a small climber who resented her presence so close to its territory. When she saw how closely it resembled a Tonapa chitka, she relaxed a smidgen. Perhaps where she found herself wasn't as alien as she'd suspected.

Deciding to travel on before she broke her fast, she saluted the chitka and hit the trail, as Vrin used to say when they were small. She smiled, remembering how she'd argued that a trail couldn't be hit and how he'd

laughed at her. Something about being on a journey brought back memories of her childhood, when she and Vrin had roamed the hills near their village.

“I’m going to really travel when I grow up,” he’d told her. “So far away I won’t even be able to see Mizpa in the distance, much less our village, places where everything is strange and exciting. Maybe I’ll come back and maybe I won’t.”

Vrin had made good on his boast, though she’d left the village long before he did. Her grandfather’s letters had told her Vrin was now a Far Flyer.

Zareen sighed. She sometimes missed Vrin, but theirs had been a juvenile closeness that had ended when she became a Verbot Temple acolyte. Her destiny lay in a direction she’d had no conception of when a child, and she was proud to be a Verbot Virgin.

A slithering in the fallen leaves near her feet brought her attention back to the path she trod. A harmless crawler or one of the poison kind? She chose the safe mode of detouring around it without waiting to find out.

Increasing sunlight told her the trees were thinning and soon she came to the end of the woods, stepping into a lush meadow where colorful blooms nodded among the blades of what looked to be a type of grain. High above two large predatory fliers searching for prey coasted in spirals on the wind. Small green and blue fliers darted about, ignoring their possible danger, reminding her of another of her grandfather’s admonitions. *Always look up now and again. Menace doesn’t necessarily stay on the ground.*

She was glad she hadn't remembered that when stumbling along the trail through the woods in the dark because something crouched on a limb waiting to pounce on her would've added one more worry. Plus she couldn't have seen it even if she had looked up.

A small stream bubbled along through the meadow, neither so wide nor deep that she couldn't splash through it safely. Zareen knew she didn't dare drink from it if she expected to leave the Temple again, but washing in the cool water was a permitted pleasure. She removed her boots and socks and waded across, seeing tiny, almost transparent water dwellers darting about her feet. After splashing water onto her face and hands, she put on her footgear again, and sat by the stream while she ate a few bites of a loaf and a chunk of cheese, using her own water to wash down the food. Then, after a quick look around revealed no lurking danger, she lay back and stared up at the sky. Blue, just like in Tonapa, and no menace up there.

Nothing about the terrain she'd so far seen reminded her of any land or woods near the city of Mizpa or her village, but then she'd never traveled any farther than from her village to Mizpa. Perhaps the land inside the Temple was merely another part of the planet.

Without willing it, her eyes drifted shut and she dropped into sleep.

She was once again in the Doma's day room gazing into the reflecting pool. This time she wasn't mirrored in its calm water, she saw a pack of volans running through the woods. Suddenly, instead of being in the day room watching, she seemed to be running with them, intent on the hunt,

the scent of a hart teasing her onward. How she relished the sense of belonging, of being part of this pack, free to roam with them wherever they fancied. A free spirit, yet not alone. She ran beside the leader, a huge silver volan, his fur thick and sleek, his beautiful golden eyes fixed ahead. Yet she knew he was always aware of her, for she was his mate.

Together they led the pack and after the prey was captured, after the feasting and the sleep, she would feel the blood thrumming through her, announcing her readiness, sending an irresistible scent to the silver male, telling him it was her time. Away from the others he would circle her, his eyes bright with a need that matched hers. When he paused behind her, she would lift her tail and he would...

Zareen woke abruptly, blinking at the brightness of the sun in her eyes, with the shards of the dream still clinging to her, disorienting her for a moment. She never had dreams like this, dreams of mating, and this one disturbed her. Taking a deep breath, she rose and glanced about, seeing nothing alarming. She certainly hadn't meant to fall asleep in the midst of a meadow, leaving herself vulnerable to any and all danger. Thrusting memory of the dream away, she glanced at the sun, now half-way down the sky and shook her head. She'd wasted hours of daylight.

Back on the trail, feeling refreshed, she crossed the wide meadow, coming into a stand of a different kind of tree, ones with needles instead of leaves. Needled trees weren't uncommon on Tonapa, but she didn't recall ever seeing any exactly like these. Though by no means saplings, the trees

were not giant, like the leafy ones. Low bushes grew in between them. Still, the sunlight dimmed as she made her way under their needled branches.

If I'm not out of this woods by dusk, she promised herself, I'll stop and find a safe place to sleep-with a preventive fire to last through the night. No more trudging along in the dark, wondering if a predator waited on a limb above her, waiting to pounce.

Soon a light wind tickled the branches. With leaves, the wind made them rustle, but with needles the sound was softer, whispery. She began to imagine she could almost make out words. Make out her name. *Zareen*, *Zareen*, they whispered, as though telling of her coming. Telling who? Telling what? *Volan*, they whispered.

Nonsense! She was being fanciful. Strange about the dream, though. The Verbot Temple was the home of many women and girls. She certainly wasn't alone there. Yet she had to admit she'd often felt alone, even when with others. Running with the volans hadn't been like that. There, she'd been a part of a whole. Which had nothing to do with the mating part of the dream. A Verbot Virgin needed no mate.

Birds chirped in this needled woods. A medium-sized animal looking as prickly as the needles on the trees crossed the path ahead of her and she paused to let it amble out of sight. Probably not dangerous, but best not to get too close to anything that wore needles instead of fur. Though she'd hoped this new stand of trees would be sparser than the other woods, as time passed she realized her hope was in vain. As the shade began to deepen into

gloom, she searched for a likely place to spend the night. The many deadfalls and windfalls promised enough wood for a night's fire, but she needed the right spot to build that fire.

She greeted with joy the sight of boulders here and there among the trees. Natural rocks, not ones that had formed a sepulcher. Spotting a boulder nestled into a hill, she veered off the path for a better look. When she saw the huge rock was curved on its free side, she nodded. The fire would reflect off the stone and there would be room for her beside it.

Firewood gathered into a pile she thought would last the night, Zareen made a pyramid of thin dry sticks over a small pile of dead brown needles. Flicking her fingers, she lit the needles, happy to have that useful ability among her store of small magics. The Verbot Temple sought out girls who showed some promise in magic, which was why she'd been chosen. They then trained the girls in the use of whatever ability they manifested. None but the great mages and lesser wizards had strong magic and they were mostly shut away in towers or living in castles to attend kings.

As she fed the fire more sticks, Zareen wondered what had set the wizard who'd stolen the Crescent on his dark journey away from the light, leading him to become a thief in his effort to doom Mizpa, and, perhaps Tonapa as well. Evil was difficult for her to understand, though she knew it existed. One of the Verbot Temple's duties was to uncover and banish evil.

When the flames took hold, she plucked a fruit from her pack and ate

half of it, saving the other half for morning. After she tucked the untouched half into her pack, she propped herself against the boulder and wrapped the blanket around her, sword by her side. Her eyes were drooping shut when she heard a single volan howl. Close by. Jerking awake, she got up and moved a few stout branches closer to the fire.

Settling herself again, she waited uneasily for the answering howls. When none came she breathed easier and, when the first howl wasn't repeated, she began to relax, gazing into the flames. How reassuring a fire was on a dark night, especially in the woods.

Though she was sure she hadn't let down her guard, when a silver volan materialized next to her. She bit back a scream and reached for her sword.

Words formed in her mind. *I mean you no harm.*

Sword in hand, she stared in disbelief at the animal. He gazed back at her with luminous golden eyes. "Did you speak to me?" she managed to say.

In my way. Humans interest me. I do not seek you as prey.

Zareen swallowed. Animals did not mind-speak, how was it this volan could? But then this was the Temple of Time, where anything might happen. Though she couldn't help noticing what a magnificent specimen he was, he was far too close.

"I have a sword and am skilled with its use," she told the volan.

You have no need to fear me. I am not hungry, I am curious. I have

never been near a human female.

She resisted the urge to edge away from him. “You are too near me for my comfort.”

Near enough so that if you reached your hand would touch my fur. I would like to feel a human touch. Are you too fearful to do so?

Was he daring her? Zareen took a deep breath. Touch a volan? And yet deep down, she wanted to. She leaned closer, rigid with apprehension, until she felt the silkiness of his fur under her fingers. When nothing alarming happened, her hand lingered there. She’d never dreamed a volan’s coat would be so smooth.

I enjoy your caress.

To her surprise, she realized she’d started to run her hand along his back. But she didn’t remove it. Why should she when she, too, enjoyed the sensation. Her fear rapidly dissipating, she inched closer, though still holding the hilt of the sword in her free hand. To think she was actually touching a wild beast.

I regret you are not a volan.

“I dreamed I was one,” she said before she thought.

Perhaps that’s why I was drawn to you.

Zareen flushed and withdrew her hand, remembering the details of the dream.

I meant no offense.

“None taken.” Which was true. The dream had been hers, not his.

The volan took two steps closer and eased down beside her, stretching out, relaxed.

She rested her arm on his back, her fingers brushing through his silver coat. “You’re not afraid of the fire?”

Not this one. Would you be afraid of me if I were human?

“I fear you less now than when I first saw you, but it’s true we are not as likely to be afraid of our own kind. Do you run with a pack?”

I’m a lone volan, just as you are a lone woman. He turned his head and licked her fingers with his warm tongue.

She drew in her breath, strangely honored that a volan had chosen her as a friend. “I’ve been told volans don’t regard humans as prey.”

True. But I doubt you’d trust me to lie by your side and guard you while you slept.

Since she could find no truthful words to deny this, she remained silent.

So. Perhaps it’s best I become human, then.

He rose and she scooted back, staring at him in apprehension as his volan form wavered and changed. She gasped when a naked human male stood where the volan had been. A fuzz of silver fur covered much of his skin and long silver hair covered his head.

“If you’ll allow me,” he said, lifting her blanket and wrapping it about his waist, leaving his upper torso bare.

Before she found her voice, he’d seated himself next to her. “Better,

now that I'm in human form?" he asked.

"You-you're an oborot," she accused, using her grandfather's old word for a shape- changer.

"But I admire you as much in this form as I did in the volan one. Possibly more."

Zareen's alarm lessened. He appeared to be no more immediate threat than the volan. But she didn't release her grip on the handle of her sword. "I didn't invite either of your forms to join me," she said.

He smiled, his teeth white in the firelight. "I feel it my duty to guard a lone female who finds herself in strange country."

His eyes were golden eyes, volan eyes, and so compelling she found it difficult to look away from them. As if aware of this, he leaned toward her. She shivered.

"We must share this blanket against the cold," he said as he whipped it off himself and wrapped it around both of them despite her belated protests. "You must excuse my lack of clothes. I had to strip to change form and I've left them in the woods."

"I must ask you to remove your arm from around my waist." She tried to make her tone frosty, but it was difficult when she welcomed his warmth next to her. Strands of his silver hair brushed her cheek, feeling even silkier than the volan's fur.

"You were brave to touch me as a volan," he told her, ignoring her request. "Bravery is an admirable quality."

“My sword is sharp and I know how to use it.”

“No need to threaten me. I’m harmless.”

“No man is harmless.” She spoke tartly, but didn’t move, though she knew she should. Sharing a blanket was cozy, reminding her of being a tiny girl and sleeping with her parents before they’d died of a plague.

Yet sharing her blanket with this shape-changer was not the same. Along with the coziness, she was all too aware of his nakedness next to her.

She tensed when he took her hand and placed it on his bare chest. “To warm you,” he said. “Your hands are as cold as a winter day in the mountains.”

His chest felt almost as furry as the volan pelt. Without meaning to, she slid her fingers through the sleek fuzz, relishing the feel all the more because he was human—at least for the moment.

“Now will you allow me to keep guard over you while you sleep?” he asked.

“More to the point, I need to keep guard against you.”

“I would never harm you.”

“I am a Verbot Virgin and in this strange land I know you cannot force me to lie with you.”

“True. I’d have to rely on seduction if I had anything like that in mind.” He seemed amused.

“I cannot be seduced.”

His laughter sounded strangely familiar.

Before she could decide why, he brought his lips close to her ear, his long silver hair again caressing her cheek. “May I at least try?” His whisper tickled her ear, sending a strange sensation through her, unfamiliar, but not unwelcome.

Without waiting for an answer, he caught her to him, his lips kissing a warm trail along her neck, then her face, her forehead, eyebrows. Like those from the lips of the blood-taker, his kisses were persuasive, leading her into languor, into non-resistance, into a longing for his lips to cover hers in the kind of kiss she’d never experienced. Her parents had kissed the child she’d been, even her crusty old warrior grandfather, who’d raised her after they died, had given her good night kisses. No one had kissed her since she was eleven and selected for the Verbot Temple.

Without any basis for her knowledge, her body told her that if the oborot kissed her on the lips, a lover’s kiss, the delight coursing through her might well make her forget her vows, forget everything but him. Even anticipating the kiss sent tingles along her spine.

When he drew back and gazed into her eyes she lost herself in the golden depths of his, only a thread of will remaining, just enough to make her reach behind her for the special pouch in the pack, feel for the silver amulet, pull it free, thrust it between them and chant:

“Silver, silver, must repel
Use your power, use it well
Free me from shape-changer’s spell.”

He flung off the blanket and reeled away from the amulet. With trepidation, she watched his body shift into the volan form. Would he attack? The beast threw back his head and howled once, a long mournful ululation, and then, to her relief, melted into the darkness beyond the fire. She grabbed a hefty branch and flung it into the diminishing flames, hoping to keep anything else from venturing near.

As the pounding of her heart eased, she wrapped the blanket about her, holding her breath as she wished he'd never touched it so she wouldn't be burdened with his scent. Belatedly she remembered her grandfather's warning about never looking into an oborot's eyes, for the creature used his gaze to bind you to his will. She eased out her pent-up breath. When she'd vowed never to be seduced she hadn't counted on falling under blood-taker allure or being trapped by the spell-making gaze of a shape-changer. When she breathed in again, she was surprised to find no trace of volan or human male scent on the blanket. Tucking it closely around her, she rested her back against the boulder.

Now she was grateful for her nap in the meadow, because she doubted she'd sleep at all tonight. She could have done without the volan dream she'd had, though. On the other hand, maybe it had been a warning dream. After all, she'd been a volan in the dream. Shouldn't that have suggested her dream shape-change meant she needed to beware of an oborot?

The old tales stressed the menace of blood-taker and shape-changer,

but they hadn't gotten across to her all the danger these strange beings possessed. Twice now, she'd come close to being trapped in their seductive allure. Twice-warned, she knew she must be on her guard at all times, but especially at night when such creatures prowled.

She stared into the darkness beyond the safe flames of her fire. "Never again," she muttered.

A faint howl drifted on the night wind. A mocking howl? Zareen shook her head. No need to indulge her own fancies. Being inside the Temple of Time was strange enough. The blood-taker had not pursued her and likely enough the shape-changer wouldn't either. She'd routed both and the fact she'd succeeded strengthened her belief she would conquer whatever the morrow might bring.

There was still the night to get through, but she'd gathered enough wood to last until sunrise and the fire would protect her. At least she hoped so.

Chapter 3

After a sleepless night, Zareen was glad to see the faint traces of rose in the sky that heralded sunrise. Once she'd kicked dirt over the coals of her fire to extinguish them, she donned her pack and set off on the path, eager to leave the woods. With luck, she might find herself free of the trees before midday. Her two night encounters had both been within a woods. Coincidence? Possible. Still, she set a fast pace, while doing her best to remain wary. After a bit she reached the first fork she'd come to on the trail. There wasn't a sign post or any other indication which way to go. Since the left fork led off almost at a right angle and the other pointed straight ahead, she decided not to veer off.

Soon the needled trees gave way to less tall and much less friendly trees, with prickly leaves and thorny trunks and branches. She slowed, not wanting a misstep to toss her off the trail into the thorn trees to either side. Luckily, since her slower pace gave her the chance to notice the web stretched across the trail before she tangled herself in it.

Zareen stopped short, examining the web closely. Extending from high in the trees to ground level on either side, the giant web was the largest she'd ever seen, making her wonder what size spinners lived in this land.

Two chitkas and several small fliers encased in web silk hung suspended from strong filaments. Tonapa spinners could never create a web even a tenth as large. With thorn trees on both sides of the trail blocking any detour, she had little choice but to try to cut through the web.

She drew her sword, hefted it, then paused. Webs were sticky, the filaments would cling to the blade, but might not be severed. Sharpness wasn't needed here as much as blunt force. A long cudgel might work best. As she resheathed the sword, a glance to either side showed no fallen branches, nothing that might be effective. Magic? She could light a fire, a candle or a lantern with a flick of her fingers, but the tiny flame she could produce required fuel to keep burning. This web, oozing with stickum, wouldn't burn well. What else? Again a chant remembered from the old tales offered a possibility. Staring at the web, she intoned:

“Spinner, spinner, you don't want me
What will you take to let me go free?”

After a moment, a spinner as large as a wheel of cheese, and with spots as yellow on its brown body, edged from the left side onto one of the thick filaments. It crept toward the center of the web, beady black eyes centered on Zareen. She'd taken one step toward the web before she realized she was obeying a mind call from the spinner. By the time she set up a block against the command, she was far too close to the web for comfort and the spinner was rushing over the filaments toward her. Zareen noticed a wicked looking stinger at the rear of its body. She had no doubt it could

poison her.

Backing away, she saw another spinner watching her from the right side of the web. Apparently these spinners took no bribes. Prudence called for a retreat. She'd go back and try that left fork.

Sometime later she was pleased she'd changed course when she came out from under the needled trees onto a hill that looked down onto what was obviously a cultivated field, though no dwellings were in sight. The path skirted the field, turning into a rutted road of sorts that wound its way among low hills where sparse clumps of trees and bushes grew. Her spirits rose. She might find a village where she could ask the way to the tower on the lake island. And possibly shelter for the night as well.

When midday passed with no sign of any habitation, Zareen left the road to rest under a leafed tree in a fallow field. Though the day was not over warm, the sun's heat made her welcome the shade. On a rise in the distance she saw what looked like a herd of grazing milches. Which meant she ought to see a farm soon, since the animals must belong to farm people who milked them. When she looked in the opposite direction, she saw towers and turrets. A castle. Some leagues away, but another sign of people.

After a few bites of food, she resumed her journey. Soon she passed a fenced field where harthers were either grazing or resting. The nearest few looked to be capable mounts. She wouldn't mind trading walking for riding. Perhaps she could bargain for a loan of one when she came to a farm. Or

would that be accepting something tangible, even as a loan? Best she not risk it.

As she climbed toward the summit of the next rise, a man on a splendid white harther came over the top, and stopped, watching her. When she neared him she saw that his clothes, though not fancy, were made of fine fabric. The harther's gear was also expensive. The rider was clean-shaven, his blond hair, held back with a golden band, fell to his shoulders in a loose curl and he looked at her with interest. She tried not to stare, but he was the most handsome man she'd ever seen, with eyes the deep blue of twilight.

"I saw you from afar and came to meet you," he said, dismounting. "A journey on foot can be wearisome. Persival here is a stout steed, capable of carrying us both."

"Thank you, sir, but you are a stranger and—"

"My error. I assumed you'd recognize me. You wouldn't, of course, if you're not from this kingdom. I'm Prince Fanal." He waved in the general direction of the castle.

She bowed her head briefly in acknowledgment, the only courtesy required of the Verbot Temple virgins unless they faced King Jerbom of Mizpa. "I am the Verbot Virgin Zareen," she told him.

His smile was charming. "Now that we are no longer strangers I urge you to accept my offer."

"Were you not heading in the opposite direction?"

He shook his head. “Merely coming to assist you, if possible,” His gaze told her that he found her attractive. Not that a man’s admiration affected her.

She’d be churlish not to accept a ride from the prince of the realm. Especially since she was extremely tired. “I agree that walking can become wearying. I’ll be pleased to accept your offer.”

The mount, a large and sturdy one, didn’t seem to mind the double weight. As a child, riding behind Vrin on his pony, holding onto Vrin hadn’t caused her a moment’s thought. But she was no longer a child and Prince Fanal was an adult male. It hadn’t occurred to Zareen how intimate this position could be. It was all she could do not to allow her face to press against his back as she clutched him with both arms. His jerkin smelled of leather, but there was an overlay of a masculine scent, not unpleasant, though unfamiliar. She was not accustomed to being near men and certainly not *this* close.

“Where do you journey?” he asked.

“I’m searching for a tower on an island in a lake,” she said. “Do you know of such a place?”

“I believe I’ve heard my father’s wise man mention this tower, which is not in our kingdom. If I recall, the lake is many leagues from here. Even mounted, perhaps four or five days, camping at night. Since the terrain is rumored to be difficult, it could be more.”

“I don’t expect you to take me there, but I do ask for directions.”

“Can you not be swayed from your goal for a few days? My father’s castle is not at all in the direction you must go, but I would like to invite to spend some time with us there.”

“No, I can’t, though it’s kind of you to offer your hospitality.”

“Not even for one night?”

“I’m sorry, but I travel under orders and cannot delay.”

“If you won’t reconsider, at least for the night, then please allow me to stand guard at your campsite, for this area lacks inns. We are not accustomed to lone women traveling in our kingdom. There are many dangers for-“

“I am well equipped to handle danger.”

“Even so. I insist.”

Since she wasn’t sure she could dissuade him, Zareen, said, “If you feel you must.” He already knew she was a Verbot Virgin so he couldn’t expect any lovemaking. With Prince Fanal standing guard, she wouldn’t be plagued by blood-takers or shape-changers. So she could get a good night’s rest.

“It is not necessary,” she added, “but I will not argue further.”

By evening, Zareen was more than ready to dismount. Though not unaccustomed to riding, sitting behind the rider wasn’t the same as being in the saddle oneself. Prince Fanal chose a off-road campsite near a stream where the ruins of what appeared to be a shrine offered a roofed shelter of sorts.

“I had an unpleasant experience camping at a ruins,” she said, eyeing the place.

“Unpleasant?”

She didn’t accept the invitation to explain.

After a moment he said, “I’ve camped here myself in the past, so I doubt these ruins harbor any unpleasant surprises.”

Looking around, she decided they’d be safe enough here since it obviously had never been a burying ground. Besides, tonight she had a companion. She found the notion appealing. Traveling alone in strange country tended to be chancy.

After he rubbed down the mount, he insisted on gathering wood for a fire and so she let him. When she lit it with a flick of her fingers, he smiled at her.

“So you do have magic.”

“Small magics, only.”

He offered her food from his saddlebags but she declined. “I have my own.”

After they ate, he dropped a blanket down near hers, sat on it and said, “It’s pleasant to be beside a night fire with a companion.”

Sitting next to him on her own blanket, she gazed into the fire and nodded. It was the truth. In this old shrine, open to the elements except for the back wall and the roof, with a fire in front of her, she knew his company helped her to feel safer.

“Forgive my curiosity, but were you raised as a Verbot Virgin?”

“I was chosen as an acolyte at eleven.”

“And before that?”

“I was allowed to roam the fields and woods near our village with my friends.”

“One tends to remember childhood friends most of one’s life,” he said.

“Oh, yes, I agree. Vrin was my best friend. I helped him build a tree house and together we led our group of playmates on some wild escapades. My grandfather often said we two were the most worrisome risk-takers he’d ever encountered in or out of battle.”

“I should have expected you weren’t the type to sit doing needlework, even as a child. I recall similar escapades on my part with my best friend when we were young. I haven’t seen him in years and I still picture him as a lad.”

“Just as I do Vrin. I’ve heard he’s a Far Flyer now, but in my mind he’s still a boy with brown hair every which way and mischief sparkling in his eyes.” She chuckled. “Vrin used to say his hair and eyes were the color of mud.”

The prince smiled at her. “Yours certainly aren’t. You are beautiful and I admire you greatly. You are unlike any woman of my acquaintance.”

Since she didn’t believe thanking him was an appropriate response, she said nothing.

“What do you think of me?” he asked.

Zareen chose her words with care. “You seem kind. I appreciate the help you’ve given me.”

“No more than that?”

“What more do you expect? You must know that being a prince offers you possibilities other people may not have. If you look in the mirror you can see you are comely, with a healthy well-built body.”

“I wasn’t looking for compliments.” He sounded a bit annoyed. “I was interested in your opinion of me.” Unexpectedly, he took her hand.

Before she could pull it away, he was ran his fingers over the palm. “Calluses. A working hand.”

“Verbot Virgins are not idle.”

“I expect you know how to use the sword you carry.”

“Quite well, yes.” She didn’t add that she was first in the master swordsman’s class. Pride was not one of the virtues, while competence in all areas was.

He traced her calluses with his fingertips, which she found mildly stimulating, so she freed her hand.

“Do you keep your beautiful hair bound up even at night?” he asked.

The question was personal, but not offensive. “Not at the Temple. Here, yes.”

“It’s an unusual shade of gold. I’d like to see it down.”

“You won’t.”

“Oh, I don’t expect dalliance. But you realize a prince must marry . I’ve been searching for the kind of woman I’d want for a wife.”

Surprised, she let the statement sit for awhile before saying bluntly, “You cannot possibly be considering me. Verbot Virgins do not marry.”

“I’m the eldest son. Someday you’d be queen.”

“That doesn’t change the situation.”

He laughed. “You’d be my perfect mate.”

Without warning, he reached over, drew her closer and slanted his mouth over hers. His lips were warm, warm and soft. She couldn’t recall anything approaching the sensation that rushed through her, and she relished the pleasure it gave her for far too long before she pushed him away.

“Is this what you call guarding me?” she demanded.

He gazed at her in the firelight, his expression rueful. “Will you believe me when I say I’ve fallen in love with you?”

She shook her head.

“From the moment I saw you, I knew you were the woman I wanted.”

“I may be a virgin , but I am not ignorant of life. Wanting a woman has little to do with love.”

“I worded that wrong. I meant that I wanted you for my life mate.”

What was the matter with her? The blood-taker had allure, the shape-changer had lured her with his gaze, but Prince Fanal was just a man. Why should she want to feel his lips on hers again?

A sudden gust of wind blew into the shrine, chilling her. As she wrapped the blanket around her, it began to rain. Both of them moved to the rear wall, where the wind didn't blow the rain in on them, and watched the fire sputter out.

"I doubt there'll be any marauders this night," he said. "Like anyone with sense, bandits and wild animals hole up when it rains. We need to be even more sensible if we're to stay warm enough to get any sleep. You've heard of body heat."

"Yes," she admitted, remembering the night she'd held a child close to her for hours to warm the poor sick little waif.

"I suggest one blanket under us, the other over us as we lay spoon fashion."

Zareen started to reject this, but another blast of the chill wind stopped her. What he said was practical, never mind anything else. No vows would be broken in the closeness that was necessary to stay warm.

"That's what we must do," she agreed. Just the same, she meant to keep her sword close to hand.

She soon discovered it was one thing to know she'd agreed to a practical solution and another to actually lie with her back to a man snuggled up close enough to touch her so that one blanket would cover them. So close, his arm draped over her waist. True, the warmth was agreeable, but what was she to do about his nearness making her feel warm inside as well as out? Warm and also moist in an intensely private place.

“Sleep,” he murmured into her ear, which exacerbated the problem.

“I don’t know how I can,” she snapped.

He chuckled. “Pretend I’m not here.”

But he was. Warm and very male. Growing up in the country she’d known how animals mated before she moved into the Verbot Temple in Mizpa. Here in the city, her work as a Verbot Virgin in the poorer sections had made her just as well acquainted with how men and women mated. She knew what organ of his was pressing against her rear end and, to her distress, it excited her.

“We’ll turn over,” she muttered.

“Anything you say.”

Now her front was pressed against his back, she breathed in his male scent, her arm draped over him. Was it any better? Zareen sighed soundlessly. There was no way to avoid what his nearness made her feel.

Fatigue eventually caught up with her and she fell asleep. When she roused it wasn’t yet morning. The rain had stopped and the moon, just past full, rode the sky. She could feel the cold on her cheek, but the rest of her was cozy and warm, pressed up against the prince. Somehow they’d gotten face to face and his arm was around her, holding her to him. When she tried to ease away a little, his hold tightened, pulling her even closer. Again she could feel the thrust of his mating organ, this time pushing against her private place where moisture gathered as if in anticipation.

She remembered the Doma warning her that even Verbot Virgins

could be tempted. She hadn't believed it then, but now she was learning for herself how true those words were. Still, being tempted wasn't the same as giving in to that temptation.

"No!" she cried and pushed hard against the prince, forcing him away from her. She grabbed the top blanket, hers, and wrapped it around her.

"Go away!" she cried when he sat up. "I don't want your help, don't want you here, don't ever want to be your queen-or anyone else's either."

"Zareen--"

"Go!" She reached for her sword, lying next to her, and rose, sword in hand, the other clutching the blanket. "I consider you my enemy. Go, if you value your life."

She didn't want to kill him, couldn't even if she did want to because then she'd be stranded inside the Temple of Time for the rest of her life. But nothing prevented her from threatening him.

He scowled at her, grabbed his clothes, yanked them on and stalked from the shelter. A few minutes later she heard hoof beats and, in the moonlight, saw him gallop away.

She huddled into her blanket for a time, aware she'd been as much to blame as he. Was she turning into a wanton? Not only had Prince Fanal excited her, but, truth to be told, so had the shape-changer and the blood-taker. Three different males. Was she becoming unfit to be a Verbot Virgin?

Unhappy with her thoughts, she decided she must leave this ruined

shrine, so she threw on her clothes, shouldered her pack and set off into the moonlit night. This time she heard no laughter or a possibly mocking howl. But then she hadn't vowed aloud, or even to herself to never let anything like this ever happen again. How could she make any vow now that she understood she couldn't trust herself?

Chapter 4

By dawn her lack of sleep caught up with Zareen. She didn't regret demanding Prince Fanal leave her, but she did regret the loss of the mount. What a strange man he was, asking her to be his wife when they'd barely met. No one fell in love that quickly. Of course, the proposal could well have been only a ploy to lure her into lovemaking. A ploy that hadn't worked. If she thought about it, though, she could still feel his lips on hers.

She would *not* dwell on that.

Her mission was to find the stolen Starlight Crescent and return the talisman to its rightful place before two moon time. The prince hadn't told her she was heading in the wrong direction to reach the lake with the island, so taking the left fork must have been the right way. She wished now she'd asked for more specific directions instead of wasting talk on less important matters. At least the road was easy to follow.

For some reason she'd rather expected the prince to come riding, looking for her, but apparently he was more easily discouraged than she'd thought. Not that she really wanted more of him than directions to her goal.

After a time, the fields she passed looked not only fallow but untended, with saplings and bushes dotting them. She'd been expecting to come on a village, but as the surroundings began to look wilder, her hope faded. The towers of the castle hadn't been in view for some time, so she might have journeyed beyond the kingdom of Prince Fanal's father.

Queen? No, that wouldn't suit her. Even though some warrior queens led their troops into battle, which would be exciting. Most of the time a queen would be surrounded by servants and advisors with little privacy. If there were a king, then the queen would be in his shadow. He'd be the one going off to do battle while she sat around doing needlework. No, thank you, Prince Fanal.

Past midday, Zareen found herself yawning and realized that, since the terrain was becoming wilder, she might be better off finding a secluded

place to nap now so she could be alert at a night camp later on. Who knew what the night to come might bring? Besides, it didn't do to wander in a strange land half-asleep and be taken unawares by possible hazards.

Off to the left she noticed an odd looking tree. She paused and shielded her eyes against the sun's glare for a better look and her spirits lifted. Was it what she thought? Leaving the road, she hurried through the weeds and grass toward the tree, passing what looked like the blackened remains of a farm house that had burned. Closer to the tree, realized she was right. Never had she imagined she'd find a child's tree house in this strange land, one very like she and Vrin had built so long ago. She hoped the child who'd built it had grow up and left, because she didn't want to imagine he'd been burned in the fire that consumed the dwelling.

The perfect spot for a safe nap, provided no predator was using it. Standing well back from the tree, she shouted, then hefted a fist-sized rock onto the walled platform. When nothing happened, using caution, she climbed the crude ladder made of wood nailed to the trunk. Peering inside the ramshackle structure, she saw nothing to alarm her, so she pulled herself up onto it. There was surprisingly little debris considering how long ago the tree house may have been built. Holes in the roof weren't her concern since rain was unlikely with nary a cloud in the sky. The platform seem solid enough to bear her weight, that was what counted.

She disposed of the debris by brushing it off the platform and, since it was warm, spread her blanket to stretch out on rather than using it for a

cover. From somewhere overhead, a small flier burst into melodic song. Smiling, she set her internal alarm to rouse her if danger threatened and drifted into sleep, sword at her side.

In her dreams she was a child again, happy and carefree, venturing into streams and ponds with playmates, helping Vrin build his tree house and, at night, safe and secure as she listened to her grandfather's tales of valor. She especially liked the one where a sorcerer had caught the captain of grandfather's squad in a tanglere net, all but impossible to free anyone from.

"We had to get him out," her grandfather said. "But how? Tools were of no use and none of us had enough magic. Then I wondered if we could combine all our small magics-worth a try, so we did. We were never sure whether-"

Her internal alarm woke her abruptly and she thrust out a hand for her sword hilt, realizing first that the sun was setting and next that the platform was shifting under her ever so slightly. Someone or something was climbing up the ladder. Since the tree house roof wasn't high enough for her to stand, she crouched, sword in hand, dagger in the other, facing the opening.

A man's face appeared. She'd opened her mouth to shout a challenge when he cried, "Zareen! Is it really you?"

She stared at him, not releasing her grip on her weapons.

"Don't you recognize me after all these years?" he asked.

A name trembled on her lips. It couldn't be-could it? Yet what she

could see of his brown hair under the Far Flyer cap he wore looked as untidy as ever and his eyes brimmed with mischief. “Vrin?” she stammered.

He smiled. “You *do* remember. I feared you might not.”

“But what are you doing here?”

“I’ll explain if you permit me to enter. I assume now that you’ve recognized me you don’t intend to keep me at swords point?”

She thrust the dagger into her boot sheath, lay aside the sword and sat on the blanket, watching with disbelief as Vrin climbed onto the platform to sit beside her, tanned and trim in his dark blue Far Flyer uniform. “It really *is* you,” she whispered.

He reached for her hand and took it in his. “I’ve searched a long time for you.”

His hand, warm and comforting, enclosed hers, giving her a feeling of oneness.

“You shouldn’t have come into the Temple of Time,” she told him. “You might not be able to leave.”

“I’d go anywhere to find you again.”

Though his words settled into her heart, she said, “It’s dangerous in here. You must leave before it’s too late.”

“You’re here, that’s enough for me.” He brought her hand to his lips. “I’ve longed for you ever since you left the village when you were eleven.”

Forced to remember why she’d left, Zareen took back her hand, feeling the imprint of his lips still on it. “I am a Verbot Virgin,” she

reminded him.

“So? I’m a Far Flyer. But you are still Zareen and I’m still Vrin.”

She shook her head. “Not the same. I’m thrilled you became what you set out to be, though. Was it as difficult as they say?”

“The first test, yes. There are few draigs left in Tonapa, and finding a female with fertile eggs is a chore to begin with. Then one must steal an egg about to hatch without her knowledge, and escape alive without killing her. If he survives that, the candidate’s task has just begun. The egg must be kept warm until it hatches, which means the candidate must keep it close to him at all times, because he has to make sure he is the first sight the tiny draig sees as it breaks through the eggshell. This is far from easy because a premature crack in the shell may kill the baby.”

“How exciting. I’ve never seen a draig. What was it like after the egg hatched?”

“Stupefying. You bond with the little one even as it bonds with you, otherwise the two of you never can become a team and fly together. Then you’re solely responsible for feeding and raising the baby until it’s old enough to bear your weight. Only then can you apply to become a Far Flyer.”

“And you did all that. “Oh, Vrin, I’m so proud of you.”

“After all that, as you call it, I finally realized what I lacked. You, my old playmate.” He gazed into her eyes. “We are as bonded together as my draig and I.”

How handsome he was in his uniform, yet still the boy she'd loved as a child underneath. There'd been a bond between them, yes, but it had been severed forever when she took her vows.

"Vrin, I can never forget you, but--"

He cut off her words by taking both her hands in his. "Let me spend this evening and night with you. What harm is there in that?"

She knew it was not a good idea. Still, she longed to be with him for a while. They had so much catching up to do. Besides, Vrin would surely respect the boundaries she must set.

"I hadn't planned to spend the night in this place," she told him. "I thought to take a nap and then go on, but I overslept."

"We could pretend this tree house is the one I built at home."

"Don't forget I helped you build it. I never did get to spend a night in the old tree house," she said wistfully. "Grandfather wouldn't let me."

"All the more reason to stay here for the night."

This was Vrin, after all, her old friend from childhood, someone she'd known since she was a baby. She'd be safe with Vrin. Besides, she really didn't like to travel at night. Nevertheless, she'd make it clear how it was to be.

"In the morning we must separate," she warned him. "You need to go back to the entrance into Tonapa and I must go on with my quest. For I cannot be your mate, I can't be any man's mate."

"I wish I could change your mind."

She looked at him sternly in the fading light. “Don’t even try.”

As they sat side by side on her blanket, she ate some of the food she carried and he partook of the provisions he had. Quite like old times, except then they were free to share with each other, while here they dare not.

Afterwards he took her hand again, running his fingers between hers and into the sensitive webs. Which would have been harmless enough if she could have thought of him as the boy he once was. Vrin, though, was now a man and what he was doing created inward tingles.

“A seeress once told my fortune by reading my palm,” he said, his fingers gliding over her palm as he spoke. “She forecast a bleak future for me unless I found a true love.”

Zareen drew her hand away. “Which I am not, despite our closeness as children. Tell me about your adventures. What is it like to ride a draig?”

For a moment or two she thought he didn’t intend to answer, but finally he said, “Indescribable. Words can’t convey the feeling. What of you? You’re here on a quest, I know.”

“A thief stole the Starlight Crescent that protected Tonapa against two moon night. Remember how we used to chant the jingle:

When the two moons sail the night
Starlight Crescent shining bright...”

She paused, realizing he hadn’t chanted with her. She waited to see if he’d fill in the last line, but he didn’t.

“A child’s verse,” he muttered.

Hurt, she said, “Childish or not, as you well know, without the Starlight Crescent, evil will befall Mizpa and perhaps all of Tonapa. I must recover the talisman and return with it to avert such horror.”

“Yes, of course.” He eased down until he lay flat.

Naturally he was tired. He’d traveled as least as far as she had, probably with little sleep. Just the same, she had no intention of lying beside him. It didn’t do to court trouble, even with old friends. Plus she was obscurely troubled that he hadn’t chanted with her.

“How are your parents and your older sister?” she asked.

He didn’t answer. Listening, she heard him breathing deeply.

Asleep.

She sighed. So much for catching up. After a time she decided that, since he was sleeping, it was safe enough for her to ease down and rest. Though she didn’t think she was drowsy, when she closed her eyes, she dozed.

Zareen roused when she felt something touch her cheek. What--? It could only be Vrin. Not his fingers, but his lips trailing tiny kisses along her cheek, over her ear and down to her neck, causing her to shudder with pleasure. She should stop him, and would. In a minute.

Before the minute was up, his lips claimed hers. Caught in a rush of wondrous need, she made no resistance. His kiss was every bit as marvelous as Prince Fanal’s. In fact, it reminded her of the prince’s kiss. Just as the trail of tiny kisses were like the shape-changer’s. And fingering

her palm, with attention to her finger webs, was what the blood-taker had done. But this was Vrin.

Wasn't it? If so, why hadn't he chanted with her, or at least chimed in with the last line of the jingle? Come to think of it he hadn't really told her what it felt like to ride a draig, either. All he'd said about stealing a draig's egg and hatching it was common knowledge that everyone knew, including her, about how candidates for Far Flyers were chosen. Then hadn't he all too conveniently fallen asleep when she asked about his family?

What did this all add up to? If he wasn't Vrin, who was he? A word slithered into her mind. *Mage*.

Maybe none of the night visitors she'd encountered had been what they seemed—a mage could easily have masqueraded as all the others. She'd mentioned Vrin to the prince. Or what had masqueraded as the prince. That explained how the mage knew how to impersonate Vrin.

Her magics might be small, but as rage blossomed in her, so did the three words for dispelling a masquerade. She pulled away from the mage and cried, “Omicron, shuggoth, vasily.”

Light flashed, blinding her momentarily. When she could see again, there was no Vrin, only an old man with white hair, then he, too, vanished. She was left with only the faintly acrid scent of strong magic.

For the first time in years, she burst into tears. But her crying spell didn't last, her tears dried by the white-hot anger thrumming inside her.

How dare he?

Knowing she would never sleep this night, she readied herself for another night journey. With every step she took along the moonlit road, she planned another dire consequence for the mage who'd tried to seduce her in so many forms. If she ever caught up with him. How dare he try to interfere with what she regarded as her sacred journey? No wonder she'd thought the sound of laughter had been familiar. No wonder the volan's howl seemed mocking. The mage had been toying with her, hinting he'd have her before it was over.

As time passed, her rage cooled and forced her to admit that she was also guilty. Maybe not so much with the first two masquerades, where allure and luring had been employed, but with the prince and with Vrin, she'd contributed by allowing herself to enjoy the false caresses. And she a Verbot Virgin. Shame bowed her head

Not for long. After all, she hadn't succumbed and, though it had taken her a while, she'd seen through the artifice. Now she was forewarned. "You won't fool me again, Mage," she muttered.

She waited for a response to her challenge, but none came.

Bit by bit the cool night wind blew away the rest of her anger, bringing her back to where she was and the fact she was marching along with no caution whatsoever. It occurred to her that maybe this mage was somehow linked to the evil wizard who'd stolen the Crescent. Yet, wizards, though powerful, weren't capable of sustained masquerades, so he hadn't

been Vrin, or any of the others. But that didn't mean the mage and the wizard might not be working together. She had better take extra precautions along the trail in case this could be true.

Proceeding more slowly, she took careful note of her surroundings, but nothing seemed a threat. Then she came to a crossroads, where she stopped. Continue on? She searched for a signpost and found none. Reaching into her backpack, she found the small flat container that contained a pointing needle. Opening it, she set it in the center of the crossroads and crouched over it, whispering:

“The goal I seek is far from clear
Show me which way I need to steer. “

In the moonlight she saw the needle spin around as though seeking, then it steadied and the tip pointed to her right.

Zareen nodded. She'd had to veer to the left at that fork, when the spinners' web amidst the thorn trees prevented her from going straight. It was logical to turn right now so she could come back to the trail she'd originally taken.

Replacing the needle container in her pack, she headed down the right hand road, which rapidly dwindled down to a narrow trail. A thick copse of trees, dark against the sky, loomed ahead of her. Zareen stopped again and glanced around, reluctant to enter even a small woods at night. To her right she thought she saw a gleam of light that seemed to wink out and then on again. Stepping off the trail, she headed toward it and soon saw she'd been

viewing the light through tree branches swaying in the wind which made it appear to go off and on.

She skirted the tree and, keeping her gaze on now steady light, she moved more cautiously toward it. Soon a small hut lay ahead of her, the lantern light beaming from a window. To light someone's way home? To lure unwary travelers into a trap? Another scheme of the mage? She hesitated, then told herself firmly that she was far from unwary and not helpless either. Advancing to the door next to the window, she rapped on the wood.

After a short wait, an old woman flung the door open and peered out at her, her face drooping in disappointment when she saw Zareen standing there. Then her expression changed, her eyes widened and she seemed to go into a trance.

“Are you ill, madam?” Zareen asked finally.

The old woman blinked, finally saying, “Since you're here, you may as well come in.”

“Will I be welcome?” Zareen asked.

“Aye, welcome enough, since you are not the cause.”

If this was the mage's work, he'd certainly changed his tactics.

Zareen entered and the woman closed the door behind her.

“You looked as though you were expecting someone else,” Zareen said.

“'Tis true you're not one old Hulda hoped to see. But that can't be

helped. Your name, dearie?"

"I am Zareen."

"And a virgin."

Zareen stiffened.

"Don't fass yourself, dearie," Hulda said. "I'm no witch, just a old midwife who can tell true maidens from those who only wish they were."

"Your house is a fair distance from any others." As she spoke, Zareen didn't move from beside the door. "Who was it you expected to see?"

"Been expecting him for nigh onto ten years now. That's why the light in the window. Every time a knock comes I wonder if the time has come. As to houses, there's a tidy village just through the trees, so you must have come from the other way."

Zareen nodded. "I saw your light when I stopped before going into the woods."

"Better me than that woods at night," Hulda told her. "Something lives in there you don't want to meet in the dark. Happen it sleeps most days."

"A blood-taker?"

"A canny one, you are, but, no, 'tis not. Not mortal man, never been mortal man, the creature. Lays on a branch and waits for a traveler to pass underneath, it does. Best you bide here with me until the sun's up. I've only my cot, but there's a rug by the fire where you can rest."

“Thank you.” Zareen was not at all keen on staying, but it seemed a lesser threat than whatever waited in the dark woods.

“Mayhap you’d take some chai?”

“I cannot, though I appreciate your offer.”

Hulda nodded. “Thought you might be one of those.”

“Those?”

“Under a geas. Can’t accept food or drink. I’ve met one or two before.”

“I’m sorry I wasn’t who you expected.”

Hulda shrugged. “Even an old woman needs company once in awhile. He’ll come back to me to die in my arms one of these days. I’ve always know it wouldn’t be before that. Come, these old legs don’t take kindly to standing.” She motioned Zareen toward a rocker and a straight chair drawn up near the fire.

Leaving the rocker for Hulda, Zareen chose the straight chair. Once they both were seated, she asked, “Do you know of a lake somewhere near here with an island in the center?”

“Aye, an island with a tower. ‘Tisn’t all that near, dearie. I’ve never been there, but I know of it.”

“Am I on the right road to get there?”

“Happen you are if you turn a ways past the village where the road forks and go left.”

Something struck the solid wood of the door a blow that shook the

small house. Zareen started. “What was that?”

“Happen the creature saw you on the road and trailed you here. Now it’s angry ‘cause it can’t get in. Even a midwife knows a few guarding spells.”

Zareen stared at her. “But *I* came past them.”

“You’re a virgin. Guards don’t stop you.”

Should she believe all of this? Any of it? Still, whatever was or wasn’t true, it obviously wasn’t wise to leave the house until morning.

“I can smell you’ve been near strong magic, dearie. Magic that isn’t yours.”

Though she didn’t entirely trust Hulda, Zareen decided to tell part of her story. “I routed a mage who tried to seduce me with four different impersonations.”

The old lady cackled with laughter, rocking back and forth in her chair. “Mages are like that.” When her laughter faded, she added, “Even the wizards, like my son, can’t stay away from a virgin. A mere man can’t tell a virgin from a hussy, not that he won’t try to seduce either.”

Zareen moved her shoulders uneasily. “Your son is a wizard? Is that who you wait for?”

“‘Tis. When you run across him, if you can, tell him I can feel in my bones it’s nearing his time to come home.”

“I would gladly do so, but I’m not likely to meet him, or know he’s your son if I do.”

“You’ll know him, dearie. That’s why you were sent to me. Because you will meet him, and soon.”

“You said you weren’t a witch, but how else can you know that?”

“Think you I’d bide in a place like this if I was a witch? I foresee, that’s what I do. ‘Tis a sad and terrible magic to have. What I foresee always comes true, and I can do naught to change things. Would you care to have such a power?”

Zareen controlled a shudder. “No, never.”

“Be thankful you don’t. I need my rest, so I’ll leave you here by the fire. While you’re awake, you could add a stick of wood now and again, if you will.”

Zareen nodded and the old woman disappeared behind a cloth hung over an opening for privacy. After a time, Zareen removed her blanket from the pack, wrapped it around her and turned the rocking chair so she could see both the door and the blanketed alcove. She eased into the chair, thinking she didn’t dare to close her eyes for the rest of the night.

Chapter 5

Apprehensive as she was, Zareen dozed on and off, jerking fully awake when she sensed something watching her. On the rug by the hearth a large black cat stared at her with baleful green eyes.

Witches had cats. Why hadn't this one appeared earlier? Listening carefully, she heard Hulda snoring behind the cloth shielding the alcove. True, the cat might have been sleeping in the alcove earlier, but Zareen couldn't help wondering if Hulda hadn't sent the cat to watch her. Yet the old woman had insisted she wasn't a witch. Aware she dare not trust anyone, even a cat, Zareen reached into her pack, pulled out a ornamental comb that had magical properties to repel supernatural creatures who meant her harm and fitted it into her hair.

After that the cat lost interest and curled up on the rug, back to the fire, facing Zareen, eyes closed to mere slits, no longer on obvious guard, but not asleep, either. Was it possible Hulda was worried about Zareen doing her harm?

Though she tried to relax, to rest, the cat's presence unsettled her. She got up and added a stick of wood to the fire and sat down again, looking into the flames, trying to conjure up the feeling of contentment a house fire

could bring. But then the cat abruptly raised its head, ears pricked. At the same time she sensed something inimical prowling outside. The dire creature from the woods?

The guard spell at the doors and windows as well as her magic comb should keep her from harm during the night. Just the same she was glad when the slithering sounds ceased for she hadn't tested the comb before and feared it may have limited properties.

Her thoughts drifted to the mage and his outrageous impersonations. It annoyed her to think she'd been taken in by any of them, that she'd actually allowed him to touch and caress her in his various guises. To kiss her. To tempt her. She'd played into his hands all along by talking too much. If she hadn't told the prince about Vrin, the mage never would have been able to impersonate him. Best she watch what she said to anyone and be wary of speaking aloud when she thought herself alone.

If she met any more lone males on this quest, she'd not be fooled again into believing they seemed to be what they appeared to be. "Even you, cat," she muttered, because he was obviously a male.

He opened his eyes fully, yawned and stretched, then, without warning, leaped up into her lap and settled himself comfortably. Taken aback, she stared down at him, not knowing what more to expect. But he remained a cat and began purring, the sound vibrating through her, easing her tension despite her doubts.

When Hulda's voice jolted her awake to daylight, she realized she'd

fallen asleep after all.

“I was right to let you in. I know now that, though you will best my son, you will send him back to me to die. Otherwise Jet wouldn’t have helped you to rest. He’s choosy that way.”

As she blinked up at the old woman, the cat jumped off her lap and rubbed his head against Hulda’s stockinged leg.

Zareen rose and picked up her pack. “I thank you for your hospitality, Dame Hulda. And for lending me Jet for a few hours. The sleep was welcome. I go on my way refreshed.”

As she made her way toward the woods, Zareen regretted she’d found it so difficult to trust the old woman or the cat. But encountering so many dangers since she’d entered the Temple of Time had taken its toll. The old woman’s words about besting her son made her uncomfortable, but she set them aside.

The trees, though not as tall, looked much like the giant trees in the first woods. The weather was fine, the sun warm, but its rays were shut away by the shade of the leafy canopy overhead. Zareen disliked stepping into the semi-gloom, but the road she must follow ran through the woods so she had no choice. She set a good pace, wanting to get beyond the gloom as soon as possible.

After a time, a low branch brushed her head, knocking the comb free. She paused to scoop it from the ground and, as she slid it into her pack, decided to take it as a warning. Ahead, branches from trees to either side of

the road tangled together and she advanced slowly, her gaze on those branches, looking up as her grandfather had warned. When she started to step under the branches, the hair on her nape rose in alarm.

Zareen stopped, peering upward. She drew in her breath. A huge, round, mottled length lay stretched out on a branch that intersected with another just ahead. It had to be three times the length of a tall man. Some kind of crawler, but bigger than any she'd ever seen or even heard of. Hand on her sword hilt, she hesitated, then decided against drawing it. The creature lay unmoving. Recalling Hulda telling her the monster was active only at night, Zareen drew in a silent breath and let it out as quietly. If she believed Hulda, the creature could be sleeping. Best to run as fast as she could under those branches and keep running for a time?

Setting any doubts aside, she flung herself forward as if she were competing in a race, legs pumping, sheath slapping at her thigh, pack bouncing on her back. She cleared the dangerous branch and kept going. Safe? To her dismay, she heard a thump behind her, as though a heavy body had dropped to the ground. Without glancing behind her, she ran faster, calling up all her strength.

Zareen raced along until she had no breath, gasping, desperate for a second wind to kick in. She didn't even realize she was leaving the woods behind until she burst into full sunlight. Only then did she slow to look around. Nothing pursued her. But she kept going, walking fast, not daring to stop to rest until she finally came to the outskirts of the village. There she

all but collapsed against a gatepost, letting it prop her up while she caught her breath.

“Old Squeezer after ye?” a voice said.

Seeing an old man staring at her from the other side of the road, she managed a nod.

“He don’t favor the sun none, so ye’ll be safe now. Lucky ye are. Got the farmer down the way not long ago. Old Squeezer poisons ye first so ye can’t run, then squeezes till a body is all broken up so he can he swaller ye whole.”

Zareen shuddered.

“Where ye headed?”

Her breath had returned enough so she could speak. “To the lake with the island in the center.”

The old man shook his head. “Tis long and far.”

She pushed away from the post. “Best I be getting on then.”

“Likely so.” He nodded his head at her.

The road ran to one side of the village rather than directly through it. The village folk who were about stared at her, some calling greetings, which she returned. Two young boys ran up to stare at her. She smiled at them, which made them turn and rush back.

Leaving the village behind, she walked on until she came to a single tree just off the road. After carefully gazing up into its branches, she sat in its shade, back against the trunk and drank some of her water. Not all she

wanted, but more than she usually took. She ate a small chunk of cheese, then packed everything away and went on.

On and on she trudged until she came to where there was a sharply angled fork to the left. Remembering Hulda's words, she turned onto it. Soon the terrain grew more hilly as well as rockier and the road climbing and descending the hills became quite steep. Atop one of the hills, she paused to rest and, looking ahead from that advantage saw even steeper hills in the distance.

The sun was well past midday when she reached the top of the highest hill. She paused again to catch her breath and stared ahead in dismay. No more than twice her length away, the road ended at the edge of a cliff. A chasm separated her from the other side.

She looked along the chasm for a bridge to cross and saw none. What she did notice was a man seated near the cliff edge with his back to her. Zareen stiffened, wanting nothing to do with any man again. But after a few minutes she decided he might know some way to cross to the other side and so she made her way to where he sat. As she approached he must have heard the scuff of her boots on the rock because he turned to look at her. She'd never seen such an unhappy-looking man in her life.

After greeting him, she sat down near him, not as close to the edge as he was. He nodded at her, but said nothing. He looked to be maybe ten years older than she was.

"Is there a way to cross this?" she asked.

“No.” His voice was as morose as his expression.

His appearance was ordinary—dark brown hair, green-brown eyes, average build. He seemed totally disinterested in her. Or anything else.

“My name is Zareen,” she ventured after a bit.

“Merl.”

Not very talkative. “I need to get across. Don’t you?”

He shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. Not any more.”

When he didn’t go on, she said, “Why not?”

“Charis is down there.” His voice broke on the last word.

“Down in the chasm?”

He swallowed audibly. “She fell.”

Involuntarily Zareen glanced toward the cliff edge. “I-I’m sorry.”

She knew her words were inadequate, but what was there to say?

“So am I.”

After a time, she tried again. “Are you sure there are no rope bridges somewhere along the chasm?”

“Not any more.” He sighed. “I begged Charis to wait until I tested the bridge first, but she was always impulsive. She rushed onto it and—” he broke off, turning away.

Without moving, Zareen peered along the near edge of the chasm, noticing there was a new scar at the verge. She rose, inching forward far enough to peer into the chasm itself. She saw no sign of a woman’s body, praise Litha, for that would have completely unsettled her. But she did

make out what appeared to be the remains of the rope bridge.

Stepping back, she glanced at Merle who sat with his head in his hands.

“Charis was so lovely,” he said, finally looking at Zareen again. “Her hair was lighter than yours-moonlight fair-and fell in waves to her shoulders. Your eyes are more gray than blue, hers were an unusual shade between blue and green. She was a bit shorter than you and...”

As Merle went on describing Charis, Zareen began to imagine she could see a woman’s figure forming in space between the two of them. A beautiful woman, one any man would want for his own.

“I think I see her phantasm,” she whispered. “What a shock for you to lose her.” As she spoke the vision vanished, making her decide she’d concocted the image in her own mind.

Merle rose abruptly. “I must not sit here brooding. Charis wouldn’t have wanted me to. We came on a mission together, one I still must fulfill.”

About to ask him how, if he couldn’t cross the chasm, a whirring as of giant wings made Zareen spring to her feet and gaze up. She gasped and reached for her sword hilt.

A green draig hovered above them.

Chapter 6

As the draig, a giant beast, settled down on the ground behind them, Zareen moved between Merl and the monster, sword in hand. He hurried to join her, his own sword drawn.

I mean you no harm.

Zareen blinked as the words formed in her mind. When she glanced at Merl he gestured toward the draig.

“Are you speaking to us, draig?” she demanded.

I am. My name is Vorst and I’ve come to help you cross the chasm.

She gazed into the draig’s amethyst eyes-strange, she’d thought they all had yellow eyes-and wondered what kind of a ploy this was.

“How can we believe that when draigs are enemies of humans?” she asked.

I, Vorst, am a different kind of draig. I was created to help people, not harm them. Climb onto my back and I will fly you across the chasm.

Though she was reluctant to believe a word of it, to her surprise, Merl

shoved his sword into its sheath, picked up his pack and marched toward the draig.

“Wait!” she cried.

“This draig has given us his name, which means he speaks truth,” Merl called over his shoulder. “Didn’t you know that about draigs?”

She hadn’t and wasn’t sure she believed it. Apprehensively, she watched Merl scramble up the side of the crouched draig and seat himself on its back, between the wings.

“Plenty of room for you,” he called down to her. “You can trust Vorst.”

“If you speak truth,” she said to Vorst, “tell me you will not harm us.”

I pledge my word.

“Draigs do not promise idly,” Merl said. “Are you coming or staying behind?”

Obviously he didn’t care which she chose to do, and the draig did seem to be the only way to cross the chasm. Against her better judgment, Zareen thrust her sword into its sheath and cautiously advanced toward Vorst.

Merl leaned down, grabbed her hand and helped her scramble up behind him. Before she had time to draw a breath, the draig rose, climbing up and up. He circled over the chasm once, twice, and then suddenly spiraled downward. With the two of them clutching any part of Vorst they could reach, he landed at the bottom of the chasm on a narrow strip of land

that ran along the stream at the bottom. As nearly as Zareen could make out they were upstream from where Charis had plunged down with the rope bridge.

“This is not the other side of the chasm,” Merl accused.

True, but in your mind is the picture of a cave and so I took you here. When you return I will know and await you here.

Merl looked around, pointed and said, “I see the cave.” He slid off the draig’s back and looked up at Zareen.

She was about to tell Vorst that she had no picture of a cave in *her* mind, when the draig shrugged, making her slide off. Merl caught her and set her on her feet. Together they watched as Vorst walked into the stream, then, wings flapping, rose slowly upward, finally rising above the top of the chasm cliffs and flying out of their sight.

Merl started for the cave. Unwilling to be left behind, Zareen trailed him. As they neared the cave maw, she stopped, a tremor of dread along her spine. Merl paused as well.

“Noisome spot,” he muttered. “But Vorst was right. What I seek is within that cave.”

“Then you seek something dreadful.”

He shook his head. “What I seek, what Charis and I sought, is a flier, the sacred ahver of light, stolen from our people and imprisoned in the cave. I agree a monster must lair inside, one that may prove hard to kill. Still, I have no choice but to enter. You need not take the risk.”

Zareen brushed aside his attempt at chivalry, rising to the challenge of danger. “No matter what waits inside, two swords are better than one. But we need light. Whatever beast awaits would have an advantage in the dark.”

Merl gathered some dead branches from the few trees along the strip of land outside the cave. After pruning them with his knife into rough torches, he handed two to Zareen and kept two for himself. She flicked her fingers and lighted one of his and one for herself.

“Good, you have some magic,” he said. “We may need it.”

“Mine is far from great,” she told him as they entered the cave maw, torches held high. Her sword was in her free hand and she had thrust the second stick into the empty sheath, as Merl had done.

The air of the cave was tainted with a dark miasma, no doubt from the beast. What kind of a creature would live in a cave? Draigs did, she’d heard, but she hadn’t noticed an offensive odor like this coming from Vorst.

“Will we be facing a draig?” She kept her voice low.

“A crawler of some kind, not a draig.”

The light from their torches revealed slime coating the cave walls, but, fortunately, the floor of the cave seemed to be earth and so wasn’t unduly slippery. Small, pale unhealthy-looking creatures skittered along the walls and up along the ceiling of the cave. The smoke from the torches drifted to in back of them showing the cave must have circulation. Zareen fervently hoped there was another exit.

The underground passage, large enough for two abreast, twisted and turned, but didn't divide so they were saved from making choices, which she was thankful for. Hearing a faint slithering sound from up ahead, her steps faltered for a instant, but Merl didn't hesitate and so she kept pace with him. Now, though, they had to pick their way around the skulls and bones of what she supposed had to be what was left of the creature's prey.

The sound grew louder. The cave widened into a room-sized cavity. Merl stopped and paced around, torch high, examining it. "Best to face whatever's coming where we have room to maneuver," he said.

He thrust the end of his improvised torch into the ground, anchoring it. Zareen found a crack in the wall she could wedge hers in so it stayed upright. "Do you fight well back to back?" he asked.

"When warranted."

"May not be necessary, just wondered if you had the training."

An unnerving slobbery humming now accompanied the slithering. She crouched, sword at the ready, alert and poised to strike. Her fear ebbed as she eased into the warrior mode where fear had no place.

The flickering torch-light shone on a large diamond-shaped head, at first near the floor, then rising as the body slithered into sight. Yellow eyes with slit pupils stared from Zareen to Merl and back. The immense, pale body coiled. To strike, Zareen knew. "Poisonous," she muttered.

There were poisonous crawlers on Tonapa, but not anything like this giant, fanged monster.

“Croma,” he said. “I’ve heard of them.

“I’ll distract it while you attack,” she told Merl, hoping she was fast enough to spring beyond the croma’s range before it bit her.

Without waiting for him to reply, she hissed at the croma and the diamond head swung toward her. Zareen danced back and forth, holding its attention as Merl eased slowly to the other side of it.

Zap! The fangs missed Zareen by a finger-breadth. The croma drew its massive head back for another strike.

She flung herself to one side and the head whizzed by her again, so close she felt the breeze of its passage.

From the corner of her vision Zareen saw Merl’s sword rise and slash just as one of the torches sizzled and went out, cutting down the light to a dim glow. With her free hand, she yanked the extra stick from her sheath, but had to use the fingers of her sword hand to light it. In the sudden flare, she saw the huge head aimed at her again, ichor oozing from Merl’s sword slash. With her now awkward grip on the sword, it was temporarily useless so she thrust the flaming torch into the croma’s open mouth ramming it forward and letting it go.

A terrible burning stench filled the room-like cavity. By the time Zareen hefted her sword into position, Merl’s sword stroke severed the croma’s burnt head. The huge coils loosened, flopping this way and that while the two of them struggled in near darkness to prevent being dashed to the ground as they made for the far end where the croma had entered.

Escaping into darkness, they paused long enough for Merl to pull his extra stick free and let Zareen light it. With the single torch, they hurried along the passageway, the loud thrashing of the cromas' beheaded body growing fainter and fainter. Swords still drawn, they splashed through runnels of water. A glimmer of light ahead made her hope for an exit, but when they came closer she saw it came from inside a black cage. Merl muttered words she didn't recognize, the cage door swung open and a white ahver, glowing with light, flew out, landing on his shoulder.

"Your sacred ahver!" she cried.

As they went on, the cave forked. The ahver flew off his shoulder, choosing the right fork, once again resuming its perch when they followed. After a time the last torch winked out, but the bird's light was enough to guide them on until they finally reached an exit. Zareen hoped for something other than the chasm and breathed a sigh of relief when they came out into a broad meadow. Wanting to get as far from the cave mouth as possible, they traveled on despite the fading daylight.

With night coming on, Merl chose a camp site by a stream, where a single tree grew. "I'd prefer a spot less open," he said, "but the ahver, being magic, will stay alert while we sleep and warn of any danger."

Zareen decided to trust that it was true. Certainly this ahver wasn't like any flier she'd ever seen. Besides, her own internal alarm would rouse her. She didn't feel Merl was any threat since he'd shown no awareness of her as a woman. They ate and drank sparingly, each out of their own packs.

Merl seemed disinclined to talk. Tired as she was, she had no taste for conversation, either. Rolling up in her blanket she stretched out under the tree and fell into an exhausted sleep.

At first she thought she was dreaming when hands caressed her breasts, roaming down to slide between her thighs, touching her there so expertly she began to moan. Forcing herself fully awake, she sat up. No one was near her. Several lengths away Merl lay wrapped in his blanket, back to her, his deep breathing telling her he slept. He couldn't possibly be the one who'd touched her so intimately. Moonlight showed her no one else anywhere around. In the tree above, the ahver perched on a branch, giving no sign anyone or anything had come near the camp.

Had it been a dream, after all? Zareen sighed and stretched out again, but this time sleep took longer to visit her. When it did, she dreamed...

In the dark it was impossible to see who held her in his arms, but she didn't care, bemused and thrilled by the way he touched her-here, there, everywhere. How had she lived for twenty years without knowing there were so many sensitive spots on her body? Not only her breasts, but the hollow of her throat, the inside of her ears, even the soles of her feet. She throbbed with longing, wanting more, needing more from whoever he was...

She woke slowly, languorously-and found herself alone. It took her a moment to orient herself. Merl was nowhere in sight, and the ahver wasn't in the tree. She rose and saw him splashing in the stream, naked, washing himself. Despite ordering herself to turn away, she stared.

He wasn't as handsome as the prince, or as tall as Vrin-false prince, false Vrin, she reminded herself. Merl was a real man, not a mage's projection. Perhaps he was no more than average in appearance, but she liked the way he looked. She felt reassured that he paid her no compliments, but treated her only as a companion. Turning away before he caught her staring, she realized she'd be sorry when they parted. Now that he'd found the magic ahver of his people, he'd be leaving her, be going back to the Temple of Time entrance. They'd never meet again. This shouldn't disturb her, but it did.

When he came back to the tree, he was dressed. "I recommend the stream for bathing," he said.

Although he didn't add that he wouldn't watch while she washed, Zareen decided to believe he wouldn't. "I'll take your advice," she told him, and did.

Even though her clothes were far from clean, she felt refreshed as she donned them again.

Returning to the tree, she said, "It's occurred to me to wonder if the cromas would be counted as a sentient being."

Merl shrugged.

"If it is and you killed it, how will you'll be able to leave the Temple when you reach the entrance?"

"You can't kill a cromas unless you throw all of its parts into a fire and burn them to ashes that then must be thrown into the Lake Of Doom. Even if

chopped to pieces, a croma can gather any missing parts and regenerate, though it may take some time."

"So that means you'll have to hurry before that happens. You do mean to go back through the cave to the chasm, don't you, having fulfilled your quest?"

Instead of answering, he asked, "Is your quest a secret?"

She shook her head. "I seek the Starlight Crescent stolen from my people by a twisted wizard."

"Do you know where the Crescent is?"

"Hidden inside a tower on a island in the middle of a lake."

"The Lake of Doom."

She blinked. "That's the name of the lake?"

"Yes. Weren't you told?"

"The Verbot Doma didn't know the name."

"Though I live some leagues from Mizpa, I've heard of the Verbot Temple there, and, of course, the Star Temple. So you've been sent to recover the Crescent. Fair is fair. You helped me to succeed; I shall help you."

Zareen stared at him. "But you've found your people's scared ahver."

"I believe the ahver will be of help as we search for the Crescent."

"I don't know what to say. Think, though, you may endanger yourself by remaining longer in the Temple of Time."

Merl's smile was sad. "I recovered the ahver, but Charis is beyond

recovery. You came to help me when I despaired, now I must help you. She would want me to.”

Zareen could hardly refuse. Especially when she did want his companionship on her quest. “I thank you. You spoke of the Lake of Doom. Do you know its location?”

“We’re right on track.”

“And how did it acquire that name?”

“Nobody dares swim in that lake or drink the water. Too dangerous. One ferryboat takes those who brave the lake across to the island, but the rower of the boat varies. The traveler must be wary.”

Hearing this made her glad he’d be with her. She could do it on her own, but, after all, it had taken the two of them to best the croma.

“Your company will be welcome.”

When they set off, as before, the ahver flew to perch on Merl’s shoulder.

“You said the flier was magic?” Zareen asked.

“Among other traits, she’s able to heal as well as shedding light wherever she flies. She’ll also keep us going in the right direction for the Lake of Doom.”

Impressed, Zareen glanced over at the bird and said to her, “Magic ahver, I am pleased to be in your company.”

The flier looked at her and chirped once in response.

A short while later they came to a river with a covered wooden bridge

spanning it. Zareen stopped short of the bridge and Merle shot her an inquiring look.

“Consecrated?” she asked.

“What?”

“The bridge. Is it?”

“There’s no way to tell.”

“Then we may have a problem. At the very least, a troll underneath and who knows what danger inside.” She drew her sword.

Chapter 7

“Troll powder,” Merl said, rummaging in his pack. “In here somewhere. Ah.” He pulled out a wooden shaker, turned the top so the holes were open and strode to the river’s edge. After sprinkling a bluish

powder on the water, he chanted words that she didn't understand. The powder, as if taking on a life of its own, drifted into midstream and under the bridge.

He twisted the top, returned the shaker to the pack and dusted off his hands.

"That's twice I haven't understood your chant," she said. "Do your people speak a language other than Tonapa?"

He shook his head, keeping watch on the river.

A geyser of water shot up, in its center an ugly and very angry troll which it spewed into the far end of the covered bridge. A few moments later a second geyser tossed up a second troll, larger and angrier, and flung him into the near end of the bridge.

Shouts and screams burst from the inside, along with curses and howls. Minutes later, a stream of water gushed from the near end of the bridge, washing both trolls and four fanged and clawed creatures from the interior, carrying them all with it into the river, downstream from the bridge.

"We'll be safe if we hurry through before they all swim back," Merle said.

When they emerged from the far side, Zareen said, "I carry nothing that powerful."

"I've had cause to be glad a minor wizard, my great-uncle, prepared me for the quest. He shared some of his spell words with me as well as a few devices."

She nodded. That explained the strange chants and made her all the more certain she'd chosen well when she agreed to let Merle accompany her.

"I take it you've encountered danger before we met," he said as they traveled on.

Leaving out the attempted night seductions, she told him about the huge spinners and the squeezer. "Strangest of all, an old woman offered me shelter, then foretold that I would encounter the wizard who was her son and best him, then bring him home to die in her arms. This disturbed me in many ways, the most frightening being that if I was responsible for his death I could never return to Tonapa."

"Besting a wizard doesn't necessarily mean killing him."

"But she was certain her son would die in her arms."

"If you were not the direct cause of his death, the rule doesn't apply. The foreseeing has him returning home. Perhaps he encounters something deadly along the way."

Zareen sighed. "Whatever happens, I must bring the Crescent back before two-moon night and save my people."

"You will."

"I pray to Litha that your words may be true."

At midday, as they were about to choose a spot to rest, Zareen felt the ground tremble beneath her feet and involuntarily clutched at Merl to keep her balance, but the continuing tremors flung them both face-first onto the

ground. She tried to struggle upright, but he laid his arm over her back, preventing her. “Don’t get up, you’ll only be thrown down again. Wait till this is over.”

Rumbles and roars accompanied the shaking. The ground ahead of them cracked open and a tree slid into the hole before the crack shut again. The steady pressure of Merl’s arm along her back reassured her that whatever it was would eventually cease, which diminished her fear.

Eventually the noise and the shaking ceased. A great cloud of dust rose up to dim the sunlight and make both of them cough. Merl rose and helped her up.

“What was that?” she demanded. “I’ve never experienced such a thing on Tonapa.”

“Did not the Temple Doma warn you that these earth tremors sometimes occur within the Temple of Time?”

“She didn’t know. All her information came from the Book Of Secrets.”

“The Doma has that book? I envy her.”

Evidently seeing her questioning look, he added, “I’m interested in unraveling the history of the Ancients. We know so little about them.”

As the dust settled, the white ahver returned from wherever she’d waited out the shaking and resumed her perch on Merl’s shoulder. Zareen examined the landscape and exclaimed, “Look! Everything has changed.”

“The tremors rearrange the terrain. Anything from small changes to

great ones.”

“This had to be one of greater ones. I’d swear there was no forest ahead of us before the tremor. If there’s to be danger, I prefer to see it coming. Forests hide danger.”

“We have the ahver to help us detect threats.”

“Does she have a name?” He hesitated and she added, “Don’t you know?”

“When you give a name, you award power to the one you tell the name to.”

“Yes, I know, but unless the person is a mage or wizard, learning anyone’s name doesn’t award any significant power. The draig told us who he was and we couldn’t stop him from depositing us in the chasm.”

He turned to the ahver, who chirped. “She trusts you, so I can tell you her name is Blanca.”

Looking at the ahver, she said, “You may already know my name is Zareen. Thank you for trusting me with yours.”

They resumed their journey over terrain entirely different from what had been there before the tremor. “Do you suppose the Lake of Doom and its island has been changed?” she asked after a time.

“We won’t know till we get there.”

Something else to worry about, she thought, eyeing the woods ahead of them. When we get there will there still be a lake?

“I doubt you and Charis were chosen at random for your quest,” she

said, probing gently, hoping to learn more about her companion.

“Charis was, like you, a virgin, though not a Verbot one, since virgins have the best chance to return from the Temple of Time.”

She waited, but he didn’t go on and she shot him a sharp glance.

He smiled wryly. “No, I’m not one, as I’m sure you’ve already decided. Few men are at my age. But my great-uncle, the minor wizard, insisted that men did not have to be virgins and he was right. He also did his best to supply me with potions and spells to keep me safe. Which have worked so far.”

“But not for Charis.”

“Alas, no.”

“Did you know her before your quest began?”

He nodded.

Hoping she hadn’t plunged him into despondency again, Zareen asked no more questions.

“Since we were cheated of our rest earlier, “ he said finally, “best to pause for a short one before we enter the forest.”

They sat side by side on a fallen log, each taking a few sips of water from their separate containers.

“I hope there are no squeezers waiting to drop down on us in this woods,” she said.

“If there are, Blanca will sense them ahead of time. Then it would be up to us to decide on fight or flight. Her powers don’t include eliminating

danger.”

“I remember you said she was a healer.”

“More that she can impart the life spirit with her light, which can be healing.”

Zareen decided that must be something like what the Verbot Virgins could impart with the laying on of hands, but she wasn't sure.

On their way again, they followed the trail into the gloom under the big trees. In this forest lianas drooped down, apparently hanging from growths high above. It was also noisier and damper than the woods she'd previously slogged through. Small tailed creatures chattered as they swung from branch to branch above them. One either threw or dropped a fruit that splashed when it hit the ground in front of Zareen. As she stepped over it, the fragrant aroma made her mouth water. Trail food quickly became boring.

Goggle-eyed multicolored amphibians stared at them from vegetation growing on the surface of small scum-infested ponds of water to either side of the trail.

“There'll be predators,” Merl said. “I suspect one of the big catamints is watching us.”

“Stalking us?”

“Trying to decide if we're too dangerous to seek as prey.”

Zareen looked up at the branches above them. “Some of them leap down on their prey from above.”

“Blanca isn’t disturbed, so we should be safe enough for the moment. Most of the large predators are nocturnal and we should be through this tangle before nightfall.”

“And if we’re not?”

He pointed. “We go up.”

Flying biters swarmed around them and Zareen was bitten several times before she could surround herself with a stay-off spell. Merl didn’t appear bothered, so she assumed he’d gotten a spell from the minor wizard that protected him.

In the dim light under the trees, something glowed off to their right. Blanca ruffled her feathers, took off from Merl’s shoulder and flew toward the glow. In a matter of moments she was back, beak to his ear, twittering.

“She says the glow is dangerous,” he told Zareen.

“A creature?”

“Blanca says not. The glow itself is harmful and it’s heading this way.”

They increased their pace.

The glow moved faster, close to the trail now.

“Anything in your pack that might work?” he asked.

She didn’t know, but figured she could try the cadma seeds. One of the wise women had advised that when she didn’t know what to use, try those. So, as they sped along, she searched in her pack by feel for the prism container that held them. Finding it, she twisted the container open and held

it poised as the glow came ever closer.

When she noticed it shriveled the lianas as it passed and left dark wounds on the tree trunks, she tensed, aware they mustn't allow the glow to come too close. As Blanca whistled a warning, Zareen flung a handful of the cadma seeds into the midst of the glow. For an instant nothing happened and she feared they were doomed. Then the glow paused and grew brighter for a time, expanding. Was it feeding on the seeds?

They continued to hurry along the trail. Over her shoulder Zareen saw the thing begin to fold in on itself, becoming smaller and smaller until it winked out.

“What did you throw?” Merl asked.

“Cadma seeds. I don't know what a cadma is, must less what the seeds can do. I was just told to use them if I had to.”

“Cadma grows in Tonapa's Trifold Mountains and is a well-known killer. The mountains are difficult to climb and only virgins can gather the seeds.”

Zareen had used most of the seeds, but a few were left. She twisted the container closed and returned it to her pack.

“We make a good team,” he told her.

He spoke truth.

They traveled on, the gloom under the trees gradually darkening until Merl said at last, “This jungle looks endless. We have to get off the ground for the night. Look for a tree to climb.”

No sooner had he spoken than they came to a gap in the growth to the right of the trail. Shrubs and saplings had been cleared away around a square building with slit windows and a brass door. Merl stepped off the trail toward it. Zareen followed him. If they could get inside, it would be not only safer but far more comfortable than spending the night in a tree.

A frieze of utans, the tailed liana swingers, circled the building. Was it a temple? But who for, isolated as it was in this jungle? Still someone had recently cleared the land around it.

“Round is less likely to be attacked by magic than square,” Merl muttered. “Danger lurks in corners.”

“That must be why mages build round towers.”

“Utans haven’t evolved enough for worship,” Merl said. “So why are they depicted on the outer walls of this building? I don’t like entering this without knowing, but darkness is settling in and we need a refuge.” He strode to the brass door and tried the latch. When it opened, he muttered, “I like it even less that the door is open. There is only one, with windows too small to permit escape.”

“A trap?”

He shrugged. “Elaborate, if so.”

Blanca flew off his shoulder and into the building, lighting the interior. Merl stepped inside. When she followed him, Zareen saw the building was empty of any furnishings. A raised dais in the center reminded her of an altar, especially since it contained a statue of a giant utan, far

larger than any of the little swingers she'd seen. Yet she couldn't sense any dark force or danger and she said so.

Merl nodded. "The usual jungle predators can't open doors or get in through window slits. We'll camp inside for the night. In a corner."

"You said danger lurked there."

"If we're there first, we'll be the danger. And we're protected against a sneak attack because nothing can come at us from the rear."

Thinking of her grandfather's advice to look up, Zareen did. The roof appeared intact, with nothing for a predator to perch on.

"I recall thinking I was bored before I was chosen for this quest," she said.

"And now you wish you were back in the Verbot Temple, safe and sound?"

She shook her head. "Though I might wish for a respite from danger."

"We may be safe here."

"You say that as if you don't believe it."

"I'd like to."

After they'd toured the entire building and carefully examined the altar, with the door closed, they spread their blankets in the corner that Blanca chose for them. Zareen finished off a slightly rotten half of a fruit she'd saved and took a few bites of cheese. Merl, she saw, ate some kind of hard bread and a chunk of smoked and dried meat.

“No campfire, but story-telling time.” Merl said. “Females first.”

Zareen told him about her warrior grandfather, a veteran of the Second Great War that had devastated much of Tonapa. “Afterwards, he settled in a valley outside of Mizpa with my grandmother and raised a daughter and a son. The daughter married a nomad and traveled with him over the Trefold Mountains. He and my grandmother never saw her again. It troubled her so much she dwindled away. His son married a valley woman. I was their only child. They died of the Mord Plague when I was five and my grandfather raised me.”

“To be a warrior, among other qualities.”

She smiled. “I can’t deny the warrior part. I was a willing pupil. Your turn, now.”

Merl sighed. “It seems so long ago that I was a child. I remember always being fascinated with my wizard great-uncle and begging to go live with him.”

“Did you?”

He shook his head. “My fate was written otherwise.” He paused for so long, she was about to prod him to go on when he put a finger to his lips.

Listening, she heard what he must have noticed—a faint scraping sound. Blanca ruffled her feathers and stared at the altar. In the faint light cast by the ahver, Zareen thought she saw the statue on the altar shift position. She reached for her sword and heard the swish of metal against milch-hide as Merl pulled his sword from its sheath. Both eased into a

crouch.

The giant utan statue continued to shift, leaving a dark space where it had been. Something moved in that space, a flurry of motion as myriad tiny utans poured out of what must be a tunnel into the building. When they were all inside, the statue moved slowly back into its original position.

Paying no attention to the two humans and the ahver, they arranged themselves into a circle around the statue. A low thrumming began and the utans, holding hands, began to dance around the statue, looking like as many small children playing a ring game. They must know we're here, she thought. Why do they ignore us? And what is making that drum sound?

Zareen thought it a trick of the dim light when she saw the statue's head turn. She realized it wasn't when the yellow gems set into the head as eyes began to glow as they focused on the corner where she and Merl crouched. Even then she wasn't prepared for the statue's angry roar. Nor for the sight of it clomping down from the altar and advancing ponderously toward them.

Merl sprang to his feet. Brandishing his sword, he chanted:

“Rock thou art and not utan

Cease this walking as a man

To rock returneth, I command!”

The statue swiveled, then stomped back on rock feet to the altar. By the time it climbed up there, every one of the tiny utans had vanished down into the tunnel space. The hole closed over as the statue resumed its usual

position.

Merl slid his sword back into its sheath and sat down on his blanket. After a moment she resheathed hers and eased back down. She'd never before heard that particular chant, but she was very happy it had proved as effective as hers against the blood-taker.

"Not the most restful spot for a good night's sleep," she said.

"Now it will be. That statue will do more roaming this night."

"How can you be sure? Is the rhyme that powerful?"

"Banishing rhymes usually are."

"While I did get rid of the blood-taker with mine, I didn't wait around to see if he came back."

"What blood-taker?"

Drat, that had slipped out. "Unknowingly, I spend the first night of my quest in a blood-taker's sepulcher. Till he showed up and I banished him."

"He tried to bite you?"

"You might call it that." She was not going to mention seduction.

"Fortunate that you knew the right rhyme."

"Yes. But how can you be positive that statue won't reanimate tonight?"

"My great-uncle's magic is usually effective. If this is the exception, Blanca will warn us in time for us to make a break for the door. Sleep well." Merl wrapped his blanket around him and stretched out, his back to

her.

Reluctantly she did the same, leaving a good-sized space between them, certain she wouldn't sleep a wink.

Someone's fingers caressed her bare toes, slipping between each of them, then stroking the sole of her foot before massaging it gently. She knew this couldn't be happening because, though she had removed her boots, she still had her socks on. Yet the sensation was the sensuous one of bare skin against bare skin. He-it had to be a man-took her foot in both his hands, caressing it lovingly. He repeated every move with her other foot, leaving her hoping for more.

Her wish was not in vain. Ever so slowly his hand slid up her leg, lingering to gently massage her calf, to caress her knee, then to venture along her thigh toward her secret part.

But I'm dressed, she thought. Maybe so, yet the arousing feel of skin against skin continued. She was helpless to stop such ravishment. She might know it was unreal, but she enjoyed every moment of it.

Before he touched her where she longed to be touched, his hand began the slow tantalizing journey all over again on her other leg. Moisture pooled in her secret place as she waited breathlessly for him to touch her there.

She shouldn't be enjoying this!

The warning thought woke Zareen, She sat up and stared over at Merl. He was still sleeping with his back to her, Blanca perched on his side

about at waist level. She'd known before she looked that it couldn't be Merl touching her. More likely that dratted mage was somehow sneaking into her dream from afar. Could he do such a thing? Probably, since a mage had powerful magic.

Suddenly Blanca fluttered off Merl, he turned over, opened his eyes and looked up at Zareen. "Something wrong?"

"No." She'd snapped at him and was immediately sorry. He wasn't the cause of her anger.

He sat up. "Anything I can do?" When she didn't respond, he yawned and glanced toward one of the slit windows. "It's near dawn. Almost time to start moving." He pulled on his boots and, with Blanca lighting the way, strode toward the altar. "He remains a statue. The utans worship had to be the trigger for the transformation. I wonder who magicked it all and why? This has to be at least wizard level."

"There's a twisted wizard inside the Temple and at least one mage," Zareen said as she pulled on her boots and stood.

"You've met a mage."

"More than once. I don't care to meet him ever again."

"What did he look like?"

"When he was himself, an old man." Deliberately changing the subject, she nodded her head toward the slit window and said, "It's light enough to be on our way."

Somewhat to her surprise, no obstacles marred the day's journey. Several hours before dusk she caught a gleam of water in the distance and she pointed. "The Lake of Doom?"

"Could be."

Their pace increased and after a time they rounded a curve and Zareen saw a broad expanse of water ahead, saw an island with a tower rising from it. "We're here!" she cried.

As they neared the lake, she noticed a small wooden dock with a large rowboat snugged against it. The ferry to take them across. She saw nobody, not even a ferryman, though Merl had said there was one. Apparently they'd do the rowing.

With Blanca riding on Merl's shoulder, they walked down a slight rise and through a small stand of trees toward the boat. Suddenly a woman appeared between them and the boat. An attractive woman, with pale blond

hair and sea-colored eyes. Zareen stopped and studied her, certain she'd seen the woman somewhere before. Then it struck her.

“Why that’s Charis,” she cried. “Just as you described her.”

Merl appeared stunned.

Zareen stared at him. “But how can it be? If she fell into the chasm, she must be dead.”

He shook his head. “Just a phantasm.”

Charis, if that’s who it was, looked stricken. Blanca launched herself from Merl’s shoulder and flew to the phantasm, circling her head three times before landing on a shoulder, beak near her ear. Quick as a flash, the two of them disappeared behind a tree. After a moment, Blanca reappeared and sought Merl’s shoulder once more. Since he seemed frozen in place, Zareen nudged him.

“What was all that about?”

“A phantasm,” he repeated.

“Do you mean Charis’ ghost?”

He shook his head. “Nothing living, not a spirit, either.”

“Why did Blanca fly to her?”

He shrugged. “What does it matter? The phantasm is gone.”

Uncertain that was true, Zareen hurried to look behind the tree. Nothing, no one was anywhere in sight. “How strange,” she said when she returned to Merl.

“The Temple of Time *is* strange. Come, we’ll row across.”

Though she was perfectly capable of taking one of the oars, he insisted on doing the rowing. Gazing into the dark water as they crossed, she had the feeling unpleasant and dangerous creatures lurked just underneath. The sight of Charis' phantasm had unsettled her and Merl even more so, she knew. No wonder. Since he mourned Charis' death, seeing her simulacrum must have been a terrible shock. Was it possible the Lake of Doom had any connection to that appearance?

A similar dock awaited them when they reached the island. Merl moored the boat and they stepped onto the wooden planks, assessing the tower that stood a short walk away. It occurred to her that the old mage might live here, towers being a typical residence for mages. She raised her chin. If she'd rid herself of him once, she could do it again. Abreast, they started for the tower.

She gasped and took a step backwards as a gigantic green toad hopped from around the other side of the tower. A second toad, blue and even larger, joined him, while an orange one hopped around the other side of the tower. Twice as large as the most massive harther they croaked hideously, venom dripping from darting tongues.

Merl rummaged in his pack, then stepping ahead of her, he tossed a small ball of a substance she didn't recognize into the gaping maw of each toad. He caught her hand and hauled her with him back to the dock just as the green toad exploded, followed by the blue and orange ones. Toad pieces splattered all over the grassy stretch separating the dock from the tower.

“Powerful!” she exclaimed. “More of your great-uncle’s devices, I assume.”

“Three down, who knows how many more to go,” he muttered. Merl caught her hand again and, skirting the remains of the toads, strode toward the blue door at the base of the white stone tower. Reaching the door, he flung it open and they entered.

A search confirmed their impression that the lower floor of the tower was bare. Zareen eyed the stone steps spiraling up against the round wall. What awaited them up there? So far progress hadn’t been easy in the Temple of Time. Like Merl, she was sure there’d be more obstacles to overcome.

Chapter 8

Zareen and Merl found searching the tower time-consuming. Each level had a warren of tiny rooms with closed connecting doors between them. Some of the rooms had a staircase leading up to another level, some didn't. Every room contained tomes, some so massive they were too heavy to lift, plus magic paraphernalia, much of which she didn't recognize. Since the crescent could be hidden anywhere, they had to look carefully through each room.

Somewhere on the fourth level, Zareen finished picking through a room only to realize Merl wasn't with her. She called his name but he didn't answer. Had he been left behind? Or had he left her to search the room ahead? She had no idea. The door to the adjoining room was ajar. Hearing a scuffling noise, she decided it must be him. She flung the door all the way open and entered, about to call his name.

The word died on her lips as she stared at the old man in the black robe. The mage!

Her hand went to the hilt of her sword, more for courage than because she thought it would be effective against him.

"Greetings, my dear," he said. "I knew we'd meet again. Since you grip your sword hilt with such fervor I sense you are not yet convinced you cannot escape me. Sooner or later you will be mine. I shall keep haunting your dreams until you succumb." He took a step toward her.

"No!" she cried, whirled and ran, climbing up the stairs in the room she'd left to the next level. Heart pumping wildly, she raced around a

circular corridor and slammed into someone. Staggering back in alarm, she stared at Merl.

“Oh, thank Litha it’s you.” She threw her arms around him and he held her close.

Held her safe. She relished the sensation. This quest had taught her she was more fallible than she’d believed, but teaming with Merl made the two of them invincible. How good it felt to be held like this by a man. By Merl. Not for seduction, but in friendship. When the time came to pull away, she found she didn’t want to and had to force herself.

“What frightened you?” he asked as he let her go.

Embarrassed by her show of weakness, Zareen took a moment to answer. “That old mage, the one I told you about. This must be his tower. I don’t have any magic powerful enough to best him, so I ran.”

“We’ll stay together from now on. His tower or not, we’re going to find that Starlight Crescent.”

Zareen smiled at him, buoyed by his confidence. Still, as they made their way from room to room, she kept expecting to be confronted by the mage again. Suddenly it occurred to her that the ahver wasn’t perched on Merl’s shoulder.

“Where’s Blanca?”

“I sent her to the top of the tower to look around, then start working her way back down to us if she doesn’t see the crescent. She’ll know immediately what it is since she’ll sense its magic. With three searching

instead of two we save time.”

They were climbing the stairs to the next level when the white ahver flew toward them, fluttered in front of Merl, then turned and flew back the way she'd come, obviously wanting him to follow her. Had Blanca found the Crescent? Zareen prayed so.

After following their guide to the top level, they paused for breath. Zareen gazed from the many windows at the vast lake below, the dark waters undulating disturbingly. Land could be seen in the far distance on three sides of the tower. Only on the side where they'd rowed across was the mainland relatively close by. So the island wasn't in the exact center of the Lake of Doom, thank Litha. The sooner they were able to leave the mage's tower the happier she'd be. But nowhere inside the top of the tower did she see the Crescent.

Standing by one of the windows, Merl pointed to a long metal pole stretching horizontally from the side of the tower. She joined him and gasped. The Starlight Crescent in all its gleaming glory lay precariously on a small platform at the end of the pole.

He opened the window and Blanca flew out, hovered over the talisman, then flew back.

“I thought maybe she could retrieve it but, since she didn't even try, we know it's too heavy for her to carry to us.” He set his pack on the floor and dug out what looked to be a ball of twine. “Coated with stickum,” he said.

He opened a small container and rubbed grease on his fingers, then fastened the end of the twine into what she recognized as a roping loop. Coating Blanca's beak with the grease, he offered it to her. Leaning from his shoulder, she took the loop in her beak and once again flew out the window as he played out the line motioned to her. Holding her breath, Zareen watched while the ahver hovered over the crescent, finally dropping the loop onto it near one of the points. She began to breath again, but held tense as she willed Merl's device to work.

Slowly, carefully, Merl angled the loop and tightened it as she'd seen the men do when catching a recalcitrant milch around the neck with a similar loop on their rope. He pulled the line taut, and began hauling the Crescent in. It dropped off the platform to dangle in midair, but the stickum loop held and soon Merl was able to reach out the open window and grasp the Crescent. Once it was inside the tower, he pulled off the loop and held out her people's sacred talisman for her to grasp.

Zareen clasped it to her breast, fervently thanking Litha and all the lesser spirits. "You are so clever, Merl!" she cried. Thrilled, she impulsively reached up and kissed him.

She meant the kiss to be one of gratitude, but when her lips touched his, something far different than gratitude zig-zagged through her like a great flash of light from Cielo, the Storm Spirit. Nothing like it had ever happened to her before. The kisses of the mage impersonations had excited her a bit, but not like this.

She jumped back as though from a hot fire and searched for serenity to settle her down.

“Now we both have completed our quests,” she said when she could trust her voice.

“You still have to bring the Starlight Crescent back to Mizpah.”

“And you the sacred white ahver to your people. Together we’ll succeed.”

“Ah, yes, together.” His smile made her feel as though tiny ahvers fluttered in her chest.

Zareen took a deep breath and eased it out. What was the matter with her? Forcing herself to think about the return journey, she said, “First of all we have to leave this tower without the mage stopping us.”

“He wasn’t the was the one who hid the crescent up here. You told me the thief was a twisted wizard.”

“True, but the old mage wants something else from me.”

“I’m not surprised. As warriors go you’re the most attractive I’ve ever met. As well as one of the most skilled. But I doubt the mage is interested in your skill.”

Merl thought her attractive? She hugged the words to her. Though she knew she was skilled, she was far from sure about attractive, never mind what all the impersonations of the mage had told her. They were not to be believed. Not that she should care what any man thought about her looks.

“The journey back begins with one step,” she reminded him. “Let’s

take it.”

All the way down the hundreds of steps, she kept expecting the mage to pop out of nowhere, but they reached the bottom without hindrance. When Merl opened the blue door and they left the tower, though, Blanca grew agitated. Zareen saw no obvious danger, but drew her sword, seeing Merl do the same. They walked warily on, the ahver growing more upset by the second. Finally she flew off Merl’s shoulder, and perched on a high limb of a tree just ahead. .

Zareen stopped, staring at the tree, certain Blanca was trying to give a specific warning. But of what? As Merle took a step toward the tree, an oddly shaped figure appeared around the tree bole, pointing a glowing rod at them. Merl dropped as though pole-axed. Before Zareen could decide what to do, suddenly her legs, her entire body froze in place. Her sword, then the Crescent fell from her hands. Unable to move, she fell onto her side. Though she couldn’t turn her head, she could still see.

The man with the glowing rod approached, skirted Merl and bent to pick up the Starlight Crescent. She had no voice to protest any more than she could pick up her sword and attack. He flicked a glance at her before turning to leave and, when his gaze fixed on the Verbot Temple insignia on her sword hilt, he hesitated for an instant, then limped hurriedly away, his twisted body disappearing from her view.

Now she knew him. This would be the second time the twisted wizard had stolen the Crescent. Try as she might, she was helpless to move,

helpless to pursue the thief. Zareen could see Merl lying face down, unmoving, just ahead of her. That misbegotten wizard had paralyzed them both. As she stared at Merle, the ahver appeared over his head, circling three times, just as she'd done with the phantasm of Charis. Then the ahver landed on Merle's back and put her beak to Merl's ear.

For a time nothing happened. Finally one of Merl's legs twitched, then the other. Blanca flew up to a low limb as he began to stir. He sat up stiffly, rubbing his arms, looked around and saw her lying just behind him. His gaze took in her sword lying by her side, then searched around her.

"The Crescent," he muttered. "He took the Starlight Crescent. That's what the murgog was after."

Merle tried to rise, didn't make it, so he crawled to her side. "I'm going after him," he told her. "Blanca will stay and get you moving, but it'll take time. Can't let him get away." He touched her cheek, but she couldn't feel his hand.

This time he made it to his feet, retrieved and resheathed his sword. As he walked away, somewhat stiffly, she wanted to call to him, to say-what? Not wait for me, because he was right about not delaying. Be careful? Yes, but he would be, knowing the twisted wizard was a dangerous opponent. I don't want anything bad to happen to you because I care about you. Yes, that's what she wanted to say. But wouldn't have, even if she could speak. As a Verbot Virgin she wasn't allowed to care about a man, even as a friend.

Blanca flew down from the limb. Zareen couldn't see the ahver circling her head three times but she presumed that's what Blanca did before she landed on the shoulder that was uppermost and put her beak to Zareen's ear, something sensed rather than seen.

For what seemed like a long time to Zareen, she remained paralyzed despite whatever magic Blanca was working. It took forever for her to move even one finger, but when she finally could, her spirits brightened. At last, stiff but upright, she resheathed her sword, looked around, saw no one and headed for the dock with the ahver riding her shoulder.

The boat wasn't moored to the dock. Either the twisted wizard or Merl had taken it. Both? Impossible without a ferryman. As soon as she walked onto the dock, though, she saw the boat push away from the mainland shore and start across to the island. A ferryman? Merl had said there usually was one. Which explained how the thief and he could have crossed separately. As the boat neared, she saw the hooded figure rowing it, his cowl drawn far forward so she couldn't make out his face.

Her hand slid to her sword hilt as she watched him moor the boat. He raised an arm, urging her to board. Zareen hesitated, another childhood chant coming to her:

Child, beware the hooded man

Run from him fast as you can.

The tale that went with the chant told of a malevolent spirit who sought to transfer from his decaying body into a young, healthy one. She

must get off this island, but a sword wouldn't harm a spirit. What would? Reaching into her pack, she again sought the sacred amulet the Doma had given her and thrust the comb into her hair. Ignoring his outstretched hand, she climbed into the boat, seating herself as far from him as possible.

For a fearful moment she thought he meant to touch her, but he drew his hand back and pushed away from the dock. He stunk of age and decay and the breeze blowing across the Lake of Doom carried other unpleasant odors to mingle with the hooded man's stench. To her relief the talisman she'd put in her hair seemed to be working. The hooded man no longer seem inclined to touch her. He rowed steadily, and bit by bit the stretch of dark water between boat and shore narrowed.

Because she kept her gaze flitting between the rower and the shore, at first she didn't notice the water sloshing in the bottom of the boat. Not until Blanca gave a cry of alarm and flew off her shoulder toward the shore, did Zareen realize the boat was rapidly filling with water. She looked in vain for something to bail with. Even had she found something, she saw bailing would be of no use. It was too late. The boat was sinking. Into the noxious waters of the Lake of Doom.

Chapter 9

Since she didn't have ahver wings, Zareen saw no way to escape being plunged into the dark lake water when the boat swamped. She could swim, but didn't want to give up her pack or her sword, heavy items that would weigh her down. She watched the hooded man ease over the side of the boat and, wishing to remain as far away from him as possible, chose the other side for herself. She held her breath, went over the side and immediately sank. Touching bottom with her boots, she kicked upward and broke through to the surface, but couldn't stay afloat.

As she started to sink again, something solid buoyed her up. Knowing the lake was treacherous, she wasn't too sure whatever it was wouldn't be trying to dine on her next and was surprised when a masculine-looking human head surfaced next to her.

"Mosh," he said. "Help female to shore." He immediately began tow her with him as he swam strongly toward the mainland.

Though the axiom she'd learned as a child was not to look for defects in a gift, Zareen couldn't believe whatever lived in this lake wouldn't want

some kind of payment for helping her. Though it was difficult to get a good look at him, she did her best. Still, she didn't notice until they were almost to shore that he didn't have human feet, instead he had a water dweller's tail. Merman.

Moments later her feet touched bottom so that she could wade in if he wasn't gripping her arm so tightly she couldn't free herself.

"Pay Mosh . One kiss." He pursed his lips.

Not so much to ask. And she did owe him. Yet, what did the old tales say? All a mermaid would ask of a sailor she'd saved from drowning was one kiss. But that kiss sealed a bargain the human didn't know he'd made--he now was fated to go with the mermaid and live at the bottom of the sea. Zareen had no intention of being towed down to the bottom of the Lake of Doom. She chanted:

"Merman, mermaid in the sea,
I know what you want of me
But on that we don't agree.
What I choose will be your fee."

With her free hand she plucked the magic talisman from her hair. "I pay with this magic comb," she said, slipping in into the merman's dank and tangled locks. "Mosh has magic now."

He plucked the comb from his hair , then let her go to examine it with both hands. Zareen waded onto shore as fast as she could and hurried away from the water. When she felt she was far enough from the lake so he

wouldn't be able to get to her, she paused and called, "With that comb you can do magic. Put it back in your hair. I thank you for your help."

Not waiting for any reply, she slogged her way into a grove of trees and, once she made sure the hooded man was nowhere in sight, stopped. Everything, including her, dripped water. She squeezed excess water from her hair, found a deadfall log, sat on it to remove her boots, poured water from them and immediately replaced them. Next she took everything from the pack, and shook excess water from that before putting it all back. Since she was not wearing skirts or a robe that might be wrung out, there was nothing to do about her clothes.

Shivering, she resumed walking. There was no time to build a fire to try to dry off. Not when, as quickly as possible, she must find the twisted wizard who'd stolen the Crescent from her. Besides, moving would help her warm up. Had Merl caught up to the thief and recovered the crescent? If so, she'd come across him sooner or later.. But when she reached the crest of a rise and looked ahead, her spirits drooped. There'd been no shaking that she'd felt, yet the terrain she looked down on was unfamiliar, not the same they'd passed on the way to the lake.

It occurred to her that the wizard could have run off in another direction, but, since there was only one trail leading away from the lake, just as there'd only been one leading to it, she decided he must have taken this trail. The countryside was rough and, with his twisted body, he'd need to choose the easiest way.

Frequent glances over her shoulder showed no sign of pursuit. Neither the hooded man nor the mage from the tower trailed her. And Mosh could travel only in water.

She hoped Merl was all right. But why wouldn't he be? He had his sword and there must be more of his great-uncle's wizard tricks in the pack he carried. Still, she'd feel better when she came upon him. The only head start he had on her was the time it took to row the boat across, have it come back to the island and then return. Except she'd gotten dumped into the lake on her way back to shore, which slowed her down some.

Zareen had expected her brisk pace to warm her more than it had. Though she'd quit shivering, she felt cold and decidedly uncomfortable in her dank clothing. She didn't dare stop to light a fire and dry out. Not with the Crescent still to be found. And Merl. She needed to be assured nothing had happened to him.

A moving white object caught her eye. Blanca, flying toward her. She'd all but forgotten that the ahver had left her when the boat began to sink. "Have you found Merl?" she asked.

Whether or not the ahver understood her, Blanca turned in a circle, heading back the way she'd come, flying a bit ahead, perching on a tree limb until Zareen caught up, repeating these maneuvers over and over. After a time the trees thinned and Zareen smelled wood smoke. A camp. Merl's camp? It must be. Why else would Blanca have led her here? She increased her pace.

A warrior plays the fool and dies. Never assume anything.

She heard her grandfather's words so clearly in her head it was as though he stood beside her speaking.

Zareen stopped. Always reconnoiter, the old warrior had advised. Know the lay of the land before making plans.

As she stepped off the trail, intending to circle through the now sparse woods until she found the source of the smoke, Blanca flew down and perched on her shoulder as though in approval. Moving quietly and cautiously, Zareen slipped from one tree to the next trying to home in on the smoke. Stealth might not be necessary, but until she reached the camp where the fire was, nothing was sure.

At last she came to a clearing and stopped, eyeing the circle of stones she saw there uneasily. Every time she'd come to temples or ruins or unused shrines in this land, danger had followed. Nature had not arranged that circle of stones and she had cause to be wary of man-made structures. Yet the smoke was clearly coming from within the circle and Blanca was sticking tight to her shoulder rather than flying toward the camp. She had to creep closer to see what made the ahver so cautious.

The sun was lowering, but dusk hadn't quite set in. Some of the stones were tall and thick, others thin and pointed. Two of them had a third stone across the top, rather like a door. There were twelve standing stones and the one bridging the tops of the two made thirteen stones in all. Thirteen was not a propitious number. Zareen wished it were darker, but decided not

to wait for night's total concealment. Choosing the thickest stone of them all, one she could hide behind, she slipped behind the tree nearest the stone she'd chosen.

"Blanca," she whispered, "should I try it now?"

The ahver flew off her shoulder, landing in the tall grass covering the ground. Looking at her, Zareen nodded. If she crawled over the space between the tree and the stone, she'd be concealed enough so a watcher couldn't be certain what was crawling through the grass. She dropped to her hands and knees, discovering that crawling wasn't easy with a pack and sheathed sword. Blanca picked her way through the grass beside her.

When they finally reached the dubious safety of the tall, thick stone, rather than getting to her feet, Zareen peered around the edge of it with great caution. At first all she could see was the fire. Then she saw what looked to be an animal of some kind trapped in a tangler, a man-made restraint. Daring to risk sticking her head out more, she saw the back of a man who seemed to be staring into the fire. A twisted back. The wizard. As she withdrew her head, she realized a man, not an animal, was trapped in the tangler. Surely not Merl!

Blanca fluttered beside her as though in distress. Zareen drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly, certain the ahver had told her that man *was* Merl. What now?

After a few minutes she came to the conclusion that her only hope of freeing Merl would be to wait for darkness to conceal her. Not that she had

any idea beyond that. She curled up as best she could, her back to the stone and tried to put out of her mind how damp and cold she was as she waited for night's black shroud to cover the land.

By the time Zareen judged it dark enough to leave concealment she was so stiff she could hardly move. First she looked around the edge of the stone. By the light of the dying fire, she saw the wizard had rolled himself in a blanket, his back to her. But was he asleep? Impossible to tell. Deciding not to wait any longer, she ducked from one stone to the next, moving cautiously, until she reached the stone closest to the tangler. There she dropped her pack onto the ground and extracted a small vial which she tucked under her belt.

Blanca fluttered off her shoulder and she dropped to her knees. With the ahver walking beside her, Zareen crawled between two of the stones, barely inching along in the hope if the wizard was awake he wouldn't detect movement. She reached the trapped man without any sign from the wizard. Crouching there, she unstopped the vial and poured all of the liquid in it carefully on a portion of the tangler that was free of contact with Merl. This made a hole in the stickum large enough for her to reach inside, though she wasn't sure what good that would do. Still, if she could reach Merl's pack, there might be something magic inside to free him, his great-uncle being a wizard.

Blanca beat her to the hole, stepping through the opening and disappearing. Zareen despaired, fearing the ahver had also been trapped by

the nasty ooze of stickum. A knife or sword was of no use because anything that touched the tangler became trapped. Going back to her original plan she reached her hand toward the hole, stopping when she saw Blanca's head emerge. In the ahver's beak was a small, thin rod. Once free, Blanca dropped the rod into her hand.

The fire was naught but coals now and, with only its feeble glow, Zareen had trouble making out what the rod's purpose was. Since Blanca had brought this specific article to her, she hoped it was a device to dissolve the tangler. When by feel, she found a tiny raised projection, she aimed the larger end of the rod at the tangler and pressed the projection. There came a faint hissing noise, but she couldn't see anything come out of the end. Having nothing else to use, she waved it back and forth over the tangler.

For long moments nothing happened, but she kept at it until suddenly she realized the sticky mess had vanished. With effort, Merl pushed himself onto his hands and knees. Blanca hopped ahead of him, and he crawled slowly after her toward the space between the two rocks. Zareen went through the breach first, shielded herself behind a rock, then stood and put on her pack. When Merle came through, she helped him stand and then, with Blanca riding his shoulder, they made for the shelter of the trees. She looked back as they reached the trees and saw the dim outline of the wizard still rolled in his blanket beside the fire.

"I was sure he'd wake and spot us," she whispered to Merle when they were safely concealed.

Merle handed her something that had been tucked inside his shirt.

"The Crescent," she breathed, then slipped it into her pack. "Thank Litha."

"Took it from him before the tangler trapped me. I couldn't get loose, but he couldn't get the Crescent back, either."

He wrapped his arms around her and held her close, not speaking, just holding her. She put her arms around him, too, feeling unutterable relief that he was safe. How good it was to be held by a friend.

Blanca fluttered up and circled their heads as if reminding them they'd best get moving. Merle let Zareen go, tucked his arm in hers and made for the trail. At first he leaned on her a bit, but after they'd hiked for a time, he let go and walked on his own. "Hope I'm never stupid enough to be trapped in a tangler again," he muttered.

Zareen glanced over her shoulder. "Do you think he'll wake and follow?"

"Not likely. He'll do well to ever wake again after what I did to him before he caught me in the tangler."

Zareen stopped. "You mean he's dying?"

"Sampa juice is slow acting but deadly. He'll be dead in three to four days."

"You injected him with sampa juice?" .

Merl nodded. "Then grabbed the Crescent and ran--right into the tangler. Stupid of me. But he won't trouble us again. Come on."

"I can't. Not if he's dying. He's the twisted wizard and I must take him to Hulda since he can't get there himself. To his mother, so he can die in her arms."

"Impossible."

"I have to."

"After all he's done? First he stole the Starlight Crescent from its temple and concealed it in the Temple of Time, endangering Mizpa and perhaps all of Tonapa. We recovered the Crescent and he stole it again, tried to kill us with a paralyzer ray, then caught me in a tangle, probably as bait for you. And you say he has to die in his mother's arms-with our help."

"My help."

"I was the one who injected the poison, so I'm in this, too. What we need to do is send Blanca to find that green draig-what was his name?"

"Vorst."

As if she'd understood every word, and, who knew, maybe she did, the ahver launched herself from Merl's shoulder and disappeared into the dark night.

"When I touched you I found your clothes damp. And your pack is, too. While we wait I'll start a fire and get you dried off."

Since she'd started to shiver again, Zareen didn't object.

Merl chose a clearing behind a screen of trees off the trail and soon she was doing her best to warm herself beside a small fire. Watching her, he said, "You're still cold. Chilled."

Her teeth chattered too hard to deny it.

He turned his back to her and fumbled around in his pack, finally turning with a long-sleeved tunic of material that felt soft to her touch. "Take off your wet clothes and put this on. It's all right--I won't watch."

Once she'd discarded her wet things, she slipped the tunic over her head, its soft fabric seeming to warm her chilled skin even more than the fire. Since it was too large for her, it came almost to her knees. She sat down and pulled on a pair of his clean socks, her sword on the ground to her right. Merle eased down behind her and pulled her in between his spread legs so her back was against his body. Heat from the fire and from his body heat soon stopped her shivers, the comfort allowing her to realize how exhausted she was. Unable to help herself, she closed her eyes and leaned her head back until it rested on his shoulder. He wrapped his arms around her, making her feel not only protected but cherished. Her last clear thought was how much she'd miss Merle after they reached the Temple of Time entrance and went their separate ways.

A flapping of wings woke her with a start.

"Vorst has arrived," Merle whispered in her ear, his breath making a tickle inside her.

As she stood, she regretted having to leave the coziness of his embrace.

Merle directed the draig to the wizard's camp by the stones and he flew off again with Blanca. Donning her boots, her sword and her pack, Zareen

followed Merl as they backtracked. They found both draig and ahver waiting beside the wizard's motionless body. By now the poison had paralyzed him.

He didn't move when they appeared, but he muttered, "Sampa, blast you."

"Right. We're loading you on the draig to fly you home," Merle told him.

"To your mother," Zareen added. "She's expecting you."

"She warned me," the wizard said, then closed his eyes.

Once they were all aboard Vorst, Zareen started to tell the draig how to get to Hulda's cabin, but Merl stopped her. "The ahver will guide the draig. Remember that earth shaking? Hulda's cabin could be anywhere."

It seemed to Zareen that Vorst hadn't traveled far at all when he began gliding downward. Surely they hadn't reached Hulda's cabin so quickly. She saw a pinpoint of light below and the next she knew the draig landed next to what looked to be that very cabin.

"Are you sure this is the right place?"

The land has changed since you crossed it, the draig mind-sent. This place is now on the far side of the chasm.

How could that be possible? Because of the earth shaking? Or the magic that ruled inside the Temple of Time? Maybe both.

"Blanca led him here and she's never wrong," Merle said, then eased the body off onto the ground and jumped down himself..

Zareen slid off, too, landing beside him. It certainly did look like Hulda's cabin.

Merle carried the twisted wizard inside and laid him on the rug before the fire. Tears came to Zareen's eyes as the old woman lowered herself to the floor and took her son's head in her lap.

"I'm sorry this had to happen," Zareen murmured.

"Fate cannot be altered, even by Litha," Hulda said. "I knew it had to come. At least he will die here in my arms, not alone in some wretched spot."

They left her stroking her son's hair, the cat sitting in the rocker looking down at them.

Zareen sighed. "Sad."

"An expected end for a wizard who debases his gifts." Merl's tone was grim.

I'll drop you off at a camp site, Vorst mind-sent, once they were on his back.

The draig left them at the foot of a small hill, near a stream with a copse of trees close by. *As I promised, I'll wait for you at the foot of the cliff in the chasm, Vorst* sent, then took off before Merl could object.

Which he obviously must have meant to do because he muttered under his breath.

"Blasted draig," he said aloud. "This means we'll have to go through that croma cave again."

Zareen wasn't looking forward to that trip, but they had no choice. Merle stomped off to gather firewood, while she watched, too tired to force herself to help. She pulled out her blanket and the clean robe, now as damp as everything in the pack. Fortunately her food and water were in sealed containers.

When she'd started the fire he laid, Merl erected a rough platform to lay her things out to dry. "We'll have to share my blanket," he told her.

The only sensible solution. She wasn't afraid of him, so why did her heart begin to pound? As he began to remove his breeches, she looked away.

When at last they lay near the fire, back to back with the blanket covering them, the same coziness she'd felt before crept over her as warmth lulled her toward sleep. Her last thought was of the old mage in the tower and his threat made her dream about him touching her secret places as she slept. All such mages deserved to be thrown into the Lake of Doom. With no merfolk to come to their aid.

She woke in the predawn, feeling heat pooled low within her, and discovered sometime in the night both she and Merl had turned so they now faced each other. He still slept, unaware that he had an arm draped over her body. Somehow the tunic he'd given her had rucked up and her bare legs were entangled with his equally bare ones. Shivers that had nothing to do with cold tingled through her. A strange lassitude enveloped her as she savored the sensation. Coziness? No, this was different, exciting rather

than comfortable. Without intending to, she inched nearer until their bodies touched. His arm tightened and pulled her closer against him, but he didn't wake, though the male part of him roused, pressing against her stomach.

She hadn't known this could happen while a man slept. Because he wasn't awake, wasn't actively trying to seduce her, Zareen didn't feel alarmed or compelled to pull away, though a part of her warned she should. But why, when being held like this felt so wonderful? Her breasts grew heavy and the secret part between her thighs began to throb, giving her the urge to rub herself against him. The urge turned into a need and she wriggled herself even closer, wanting--what?

Merl pressed himself against her, the intimate contact surprising a tiny moan she couldn't contain. The sound must have awakened him, because his lips claimed hers in a fiery kiss, much more passionate than any from the others--those masquerades of the old wizard. Unable to resist the flame he ignited within her, she answered the kiss, tasting him, surrounded by his unique male scent.

Though dimly aware she'd crossed a line forbidden to her, the darts of pleasure striking here and there in her body kept her in his arms, clinging to him. For this moment Merl was her world. She was dissolving, floating away on a current of wonder she hadn't known existed. At the same time she felt somehow incomplete. She needed--what? Merl, she needed him to make her complete.

His hand caressed her bare thigh, so close to where she wanted to be

touched that she quivered, making a sound perilously close to a whimper. If only he would...

"I want to," he whispered into her ear, as though he understood her need.

Her lips parted to tell him yes, but what came out was, "I'm afraid."

He withdrew his hand and eased her slightly away from him, making her feel bereft. Yet she knew she couldn't have allowed him to go on. She *had* been afraid. Not of him but of the consequences of what they were doing. She had vows to honor, a quest to complete.

He let her go completely and sat up. "Dawn's breaking. We can get an early start."

Zareen blinked back tears at his casual dismissal of their closeness moments before. It had to end, yes, but so abruptly? She reached for serenity. "Good."

Chapter 10

Though Zareen had had washed in the stream before donning her now dry clothes, the smell clinging to them, that of the lake water, repelled her. As they hiked along the trail she decided she must wash them and dry them by a fire once they reached the night's camp. And no more kisses.

"We should reach where we came out of the cave by tomorrow," Merl said.

She swept her gaze over the countryside, clearly seen now that the sun had risen. "The terrain looks very different. I don't remember seeing those rock piles."

He nodded. "Those earth shakings remodel things, sometimes changing the terrain so drastically the entire landscape becomes reversed."

"How can travelers find there way if that happens?"

"With much difficulty. Blanca can't be fooled, though, so we'll be all right."

Looking at the white ahver riding his shoulder, Zareen smiled. "She saved your life yesterday."

"Strange, I thought that was you."

"We, then. I couldn't have freed you without her help."

After a time an unpleasant thought occurred to her. "Even if the

croma we injured hasn't managed to get its head back on, might there be other cromas lairing in the cave?"

"Quite probably.:

"So we may have to face the same one again, plus others." She sighed.

"Fighting monsters keeps warriors on their toes."

"Grandfather would have agreed. He said a warrior is never completely safe, even after he or she retires."

"If you're an example, the Verbot Temple trains their warriors well."

Zareen smiled at him, pleased. "I confess I enjoyed my training."

"You do your grandfather proud."

As she hugged his words to her, touched that Merl realized how much this meant to her, she tried to thrust away the reminder their time together would soon come to an end.

"How sad you look just now."

"We are forbidden to make male friends, but circumstances have thrust us together. You've proved to be a good companion and I'll regret our parting." How formal her words sounded, especially considering those night kisses. Which shouldn't have happened. Unfortunately she was having trouble eradicating the memory.

Instead of reliving the previous night, she should be on the lookout for danger along the trail. "Grandfather warned dead warriors are those who forget up and down are as important as scouting the territory ahead, behind

and to the sides. I'm been remiss."

"Not much above us at the moment except the sky."

As they neared a woods, she watched a thin cloud hide the sun for a moment, then, as the cloud passed on and the sun shone again, she took a deep breath, inhaling a faint scent of unseen flowers mingling with--what? She paused and glanced around, unable to identify the dank odor. Still, the hair rose on her nape. .

Merl, a step ahead, stopped and turned to look at her. "What?"

"There's been no rain. Why should I be smelling damp earth when there are no fens or ponds nearby and we are not yet into the trees?" As she spoke she studied the trail ahead of them.

He raised his head, nostrils dilating as he tested the air, then nodded.

Zareen pointed to a portion of the trail several feet ahead. "Wrong. Too smooth."

Without speaking, he stepped to the side, off the trail and lofting a good-sized rock from the side of what she realized now looked like cairns. Covering burials?

Merl flung the rock forward into the smoothed part of the trail. Her eyes widened as the ground ahead of them disappeared in a flurry of dust as the rock thunked down into a pit. A trap! He grasped her hand, pulling her off the trail and behind one of the cairns where they crouched, watching and waiting.

When she saw two large, hairy, vaguely humanoid creatures carrying

clubs lope from the trees toward the pit, she put a hand on her sword, at the same time aware she didn't dare kill them if she wanted to bring the Crescent back to Mizpa.

"Ferals," Merl whispered. He dug into his pack and brought out a strange looking object, shaped something like a fat arrow with a flimsy framework around it. Dropping to his knees, he eased the contraption onto the ground away from the cairn with the pointed end aimed at those creatures near the pit. He angled a cord back to her. "Light the fire dagger," he whispered.

Not a cord but a fuse, she realized and flicked her fingers. The flame caught, hissing rapidly along the fuse until it reached the flat end of the object. With a bright flare and a whoosh the fat arrow left the framework, splintering it. She watched as the fire dagger flew toward the ferals. They sprang back, one of them flinging up his club. The fire dagger smashed into it, exploding, sending showers of bright trails of sparks that settled onto the ferals. Howling in fear and pain they dashed for the woods.

Along with Merl, Zareen hurried around the pit, making for the woods, keeping to the very edge of the trail. "I'll watch the trail, you watch the woods," she muttered.

After a tense race that seemed to last for hours, they emerged on the other side of the trees. Both winded, they walked without speaking until finally, after cresting a hill, Merl motioned toward scattered boulders off the trail. "Rest. They won't follow."

She eased down onto the flat side of a boulder and he sat beside her. "Are ferals human?" she asked.

"Who knows? They usually hide themselves and are rarely seen. I had no idea they dug pits to trap animals for food."

"You know far more about this land than I do."

"My great-uncle has a few ancient documents sequestered away that tell a little about what's inside the Temple of Time. He learned to create the fire-dagger from what he read there."

"An admirable wizard." She took a sparing swallow of her diminishing water, but decided to save the last of her food for later.

"Running low? So am I. Two night camps will finish everything."

She nodded. If it took longer, she'd fast--she'd done that before. She hoped Vorst would be waiting, as he promised, when they came out of the cave into the chasm. Merl would need to get through the entrance before the twisted wizard died from the sampa or be forever imprisoned here.

Her thoughts shifted to the coming night. They wouldn't have to share a blanket as hers was dry now, but they'd bed down not far apart along together under the night sky...

Zareen rose abruptly, stretched and set off briskly. After a moment, Merl caught up to her. Blanca launched herself from his shoulder, flying up and ahead. "She'll find a safe spot to camp," he said.

Glancing up at the lowering sun, she nodded. Not many hours of daylight were left and they'd started early. No point in hiking till exhausted.

A warrior must never sleep so deeply she couldn't rouse at the first hint of danger.

When it crossed her mind danger might arise from a source other than the outside, might come from inside *her*, she gritted her teeth. That she would *not* permit.

"Why so grim?" Merl's question startled her.

Since she had no ready answer, she shook her head.

Nor was she able to come up with any explanation later when they saw Blanca perched in a tree near what looked to be a near-perfect place to camp. A natural rock formation provided shelter from the wind, yet didn't allow anything dangerous concealment to creep up on campers. A stream ran by close enough to be useful and nearby trees were not so close as to obscure a view of the surrounding terrain.

"She's the most useful ahver I've ever seen," Zareen said.

"Magic."

"Yes, of course. That's why you came into the Temple, you and Charis. To retrieve your people's magic bird." She thought he might say something about losing Charis, but he merely turned away and began looking for firewood. Maybe she shouldn't have reminded him of his loss.

Had he held Charis close? Kissed her the way he...? Zareen slammed a door shut on such thoughts and busied herself with removing the white robe she'd stored in her pack and had yet to wear. Though no longer damp, she detected a faint odor of rot due to the soaking her pack

had taken in the Lake of Doom. She shook out the robe and, leaving her pack behind, started down to the creek, carrying the robe and a small vial.

"I'm going to wash my clothes," she called to Merl.

At the stream, concealed behind the greenery on its banks, she shed what she wore and slipped into the robe and the slippers. Opening the vial, she touched the stopper of the vial here and there on the cloth, breathing in the scent of wild mint with pleasure. Satisfied she'd covered the unpleasant smell of the lake, she knelt and washed her tunic, pants and undergarments as best she could in the flowing stream and wrung them as dry as she could. Carrying her boots and the wet clothes back to camp, she found Merl had already fashioned a crude drying rack beside the fire, so she hung the washed garments there.

He smiled at her. "Charming transformation of warrior into woman."

Ashamed that she could be thrilled by such words from a man, she sent him a stern look. "I'm first and foremost a warrior."

"Warrior or not, I've always been partial to mint."

She scowled at him and he laughed. "Your formidable warrior attributes are not in question, but why glower at me when I suggest you're also a desirable woman?"

"You know why. Verbot Virgins are not for men's desire."

"Or even their admiration?"

"Last night..." Her words trailed off.

"Early this morning, to be accurate, if you're referring to how we--"

"Stop! I don't care to discuss what happened. It won't again."

He raised his eyebrows.

Zareen deliberately turned away from him and fumbled in her pack for the small packet of her remaining food. Taking it out, she sat down and ate what little was left. When she looked at Mere, she saw he was eating, too, and not much more than she was. Instantly she felt guilty. If she hadn't accepted his offer to help her, he wouldn't be on such low rations now. He'd be back home with his people, bringing back their stolen magic ahver.

"I appreciate your help." Her words came out stilted and formal.

"As I appreciate yours."

"Yes, but helping me was the cause of all your problems." As soon as she spoke, she realized she was wrong. He'd lost Charis before she ever came on the scene. "She was truly a beautiful woman," Zareen added quickly.

He looked puzzled. "Who was?"

"Charis. Don't you remember? I saw her phantasm."

Blanca flew from the rock where she'd perched and surprised Zareen by landing on her shoulder. "That's right," she told the ahver, "you saw the phantasm, too, before we rowed over to the tower. Charis looked so real."

"Enough! Charis is--no more."

"Sorry." Coming from the Verbot Temple, she was accustomed to helping people relieve their grief by talking about who they'd lost, but often the men could not. Switch to another topic.

She took a swig of water. "I've about two swallows left."

"Mine's about the same. One more camp after this will mark the end for us both."

His words circled in her head. *Mark the end.* She'd never see him again. Without willing it, she looked into his eyes, as mysterious a green as the strange lights that appeared in the sky just before two moon night. Trapped by his gaze, heat simmered low inside her, spreading to make her nipples tingle, making her ache with wanting what she couldn't have.

Forcing herself to look away, she returned the water to her pack, rolled herself in her blanket alongside the fire and closed her eyes. Blanca would warn if danger threatened. Moments later, she felt the soft brush of lips across hers.

"Sleep well," Merl murmured.

She might have been able to if he hadn't kissed her. Though she did fall asleep quickly, she dreamed...

Lost in a dark and menacing forest, she wandered among the large trunks of trees whose branches interlocked high above. Tiny lights hung in those branches, dimly lighting her way. A deadly creature of the night stalked her, one she could sense but not see or hear. She forced herself not to run because she might be hurrying toward the monster instead of away. Alone and unarmed she stood little chance of surviving, but it was her own fault, for she'd left her companion forever.

The night creature crept closer, she could almost feel its loathsome

breath on her nape as she slipped between huge tree trunks. Was there no escape? A clawed hand closed around her wrist, pulling her inexorably backward, closer and closer to a grisly fate. She screamed...

"Zareen."

She blinked, her eyes opening. How did it know her name? She sat up, struggling against its hold.

"Zareen, it's Merl. Wake up."

His words penetrated her panic. Merl. She stopped struggling and tried to focus her eyes enough to see him. His face swam into her vision. She whispered his name and raised her hand to touch him. "You're here, you're really here."

He gathered her into his arms and, easing them both back down, held her close, murmuring to her. "Your thrashing around woke me and then you screamed."

"Bad dream." She said the words against his shoulder, unable to repress a shudder for the shards still clung to her. "You weren't there in the dream."

"I'm here and I'm real." She felt his lips against her temple. "I'll be with you as long as you want me."

Relaxing against him, she discarded the last dream remnants. Merl was here, he was with her. She leaned away enough to raise her face to his. He accepted the invitation, covering her lips with his, and she clung to him, feeling safe--and so much more.

His kiss heated her blood. She parted her lips and he deepened the kiss. A throbbing began deep inside her, her skin tingled, anticipating his touch. When his hand slid under her robe a thrust of pleasure inflamed her, setting off a need to caress his bare skin. His tunic had rucked up and she touched the warm, soft skin of his stomach, feeling his muscles contract as her seeking fingers roamed over him. When she could reach up under his tunic no farther, she let her hand drift downward and discovered he gone to sleep without his breeches.

Unusual for a man in a night camp, but he'd done the same the night before. That thought faded away as she touched his arousal and he groaned. Because she tended the sick, she'd seen male organs before, but she'd never touched one and it fascinated her. His was not limp and flaccid like a sick man's, but rigid and distended. For mating, she knew. She should stop touching him, stop him from caressing her woman's secret place.

But something strange and wonderful mounted in her from his touch, making her mindless. She wriggled her hips, closing her hand around his rigidity as though to anchor herself against spinning away with her increasing incredible pleasure. She cried out, losing herself in a tide that swept her into a place she'd never been. One only Merl had ever taken her to.

When she returned to their night camp, confusion marred the magic glow surrounding her. She knew what mating meant and they hadn't done that. What was it she'd experienced? Truly a marvel, but...

"Is it wrong?" she asked.

He stroked her cheek. "To touch each other in love? No."

"But I'm--"

"I know you're a Verbot Virgin. That hasn't changed."

She tried to think coherently and could not. Drowsy and sated, she fell asleep cuddled in Merl's arms.

Chapter 12

Zareen woke at dawn, aware that Merl was no longer beside her even before she sat up and looked. He was nowhere in sight, but she heard a faint splashing down by the stream. Clutching the blanket to her, she stood and saw Blanca perched high in a tree overlooking the stream, which convinced her Merl was bathing.

He'd be naked. She quashed her momentary impulse to dash down to the stream, fling off her robe and join him. After how close she'd come to violating her vows and endangering her quest, temptation had no place in her life. She'd never forget the wonder of last night, but to risk the safety of her people to pleasure herself was unthinkable.

She waited until Merle returned fully dressed, then grabbed her dry clothes from the rack and hurried to wash herself at the stream. Once more in tunic and pants, she was again a warrior determined to return the Starlight Crescent to Mizpa.

As they set off, Merl didn't refer to what had happened between them and neither did she, having stored the memory firmly in the past.

"I haven't been practicing my swordsmanship," she said after they'd hiked for a while. "A warrior can't afford to be lax."

"Up a ways, when we stop to rest, we'll have a bout using sticks."

Some time later, they did just that, parrying and thrusting until both were winded. Resting, propped on her pack, she said, "You're a match for me, Merl."

He grinned. "Glad to hear you admit it. I've know that all along."

She shot him a quelling glance, "I meant your swordsmanship."

When he didn't reply, she frowned, but decided not to go farther in that direction.

Back on the trail, they soon spotted the rocky elevation where the cave was located.

Anxiety sapped strength, so Zareen set about gathering serenity to conserve her strength for the upcoming battle they faced with the croma. Since Merl was silent, she knew he must be preparing himself, too.

When they neared the entrance, she said, "A shame the earth-shaking didn't close up this croma lair."

He pointed up, reminding her the cave was a shortcut to the chasm. Which was true. Those rock crags would make a formidable climb even if they carried ropes and other gear. But the cave was a dangerous shortcut.

"Too bad Vorst wasn't waiting here to fly us over."

Merl's brows drew together. "He should have been."

"He did say he helped humans, but all he promised was to wait at the other end of the cave, no more."

After muttering something she couldn't quite hear, he said, "Vorst

helps only when he chooses."

Again they gathered wood for torches, but didn't set them afire when they entered the cave, with its slimy walls and muddy floor. Instead, with their swords drawn, they both thrust two thick sticks into the empty sheaths.. With Blanca's light they could find their way in the darkness, but the torches would be useful against the croma. The remembered abominable stench greeted them before they'd gone ten feet. Zareen hadn't retched on her previous trek through here and, with little in her stomach now, she was able to conquer the urge.

"I prefer mint," Merle muttered, making her smile.

On the alert, they were both ready for the croma when its eerie slobbery humming slithered into their ears.

"Which?" she asked as they paused at a two-forked passageway.

Blanca flew from Merl's shoulder into the left one, turning swiftly and coming back to her usual perch.

"Blanca shows us the way out. I suspects it's also where the croma waits."

Zareen pulled one of the unlit torches from under the sheath and flicked her fingers, lighting it. She also lit one of Merl's. With the torch in her left hand, the sword in her right, she stepped into the passageway, Merl slightly ahead of her.

Cautiously, step by step, they advanced while the humming grew louder and the walls grew pock-marked with possible passageways. The

same pale and hideous little creatures they'd seen before in the cave dived in and out of one hole to another, each movement jerking Zareen's awareness tauter.

"You watch left, I'll take right," she said.

When the giant diamond-shaped head of the croma darted out of a hole to their right, she danced out of range of the strike, seeing Merl's sword flash. The croma was equally fast, so his stroke missed. Blanca screeched a warning and left Merl's shoulder to fly down the corridor just under the cave roof.

"Both sides," Merl yelled.

She caught a glimpse of a croma's head on the left side, but, with the right hand croma poised to strike again, he'd have to handle the one on the left. She didn't even dare take the time to see how he was faring.

In a deadly game of wits, she and her croma parried and thrust in a life or death battle. She finally managed to thrust her torch in between its fanged jaws, losing it there. She followed with a sword slice that severed its head. The croma's body flopped out of the hole, one of its writhing coils slamming against her, knocking her sword from her hand, the coil landing on top of the weapon.

She jumped free of the coils and turned to look at Merl. To her horror, the croma menacing him had two heads. She glanced back at her sword, saw it was not retrievable, so grabbed her second torch, lit it, and pulled her dagger from her boot. Long necks attached the two heads to the

croma's thick body and each head acted independently of the other. To keep from being attacked by one while he threatened the other, Merl had to try to watch them both at once.

"I'll take on the one to the left," she called to him. He ducked a lightning fast lunge from the one on the right and cast her a swift glance. Then he tossed his torch at the head to the right, causing it to retreat for a moment. By now she was too busy trying to disable the left head that she couldn't watch anything else.

"Get back!" he shouted.

Without question she obeyed the command from one warrior to another.

A bright flash, a blast that echoed down the corridor, and the two-headed croma exploded in front of her, pieces of it flying everywhere. She flinched, almost dropping her torch as she tried to avoid letting any of them hit her. Those on the ground began wriggling as if trying to find each other. Zareen swallowed the bile that rose in her throat.

"What did you do?" She heard the quaver in her voice and chastised herself. Warriors did not get queasy. She returned the dagger to her boot and took a deep breath, instantly regretting it as acrid fumes choked her.

Without answering, Merl grasped her hand and pulled her with him along the corridor, away from the cromas trying to reattach their parts. Her torch flared and died. Darkness closed around them except for a white speck ahead, that grew larger until finally Blanca fluttered ahead of them.

They followed her glow and, after what seemed an eternity, stumbled out of the cave into the fading light of day and found themselves at the bottom of the chasm.

I've been waiting. Vorst's mind-sent. *What took you so long?*

Merl glared at the draig. "You question *me*?"

I am a draig, not an ahver. I am my own creature.

With a final scowl at Vorst, Merl climbed onto the draig's back and reached down a hand to help her up.

The draig unfolded his wings, and launched himself along the creek until he was well airborne before he began spiraling out of the chasm to the top of the cliff. He flew on until dusk, settling to earth near a pool beside the trail, a pool that Zareen knew had not been there when she'd come this way before.

I leave you here, where you can reach the entrance in the morning. I do not return.

Merl slid off the draig. When she was down and stood beside him, she saw his clenched fists. Vorst flew off in a great flap of wings.

"Why do you look so angry? Vorst did help us. And, as he said, he *is* his own creature."

Merl's effort to control himself was so visible that she wondered what had upset him. Setting that aside, she glanced around, choose the most likely spot for the night fire and tossed her pack next to it, then began looking for firewood. If what Vorst said was true--and Merl had said draigs

don't lie--this would be their last night's camp.

So why didn't she feel exhilarated, happy to be so close to completing her quest, to be leaving the Temple of Time?

She noticed Merl stalk off in another direction to find wood. By the time he joined her at the camp site, carrying an armful of branches, she already had a small fire burning, had taken the last sip of water and removed her boots. She had no more food. Merl sat beside her, pulling off his boots, but made no effort to either eat nor drink, because, she knew, he didn't have anything left, either

"You should have enough time to reach the entrance before the twisted wizard dies," she said.

He blinked at her. "What?"

"You said the sampa took three or four days to kill, so there's still time for you to get out of the Temple before he dies. By tomorrow night we'll both be sleeping somewhere in Tonapa."

"Will we?" His voice sounded sad rather than angry.

She stared at him. "Vorst said we were close to the entrance. Do you think you won't be able to pass the barrier?"

"That doesn't trouble me."

"What does then? Are you hungry?"

He reached for her hand, holding it in his, giving her a sense of closeness. "Being with you is better than the finest food."

She stored his words in her heart. "I wish this wasn't our last night

together. I didn't realize what could be between a man and a woman. Friendship, companionship and--and the other."

"You've experienced only a part of the lovemaking."

And longed for more, longed for what she couldn't have.

He was silent for a time, his thumb caressing the back of her hand, fueling a desire for more intimate caresses, ones she remembered from last night.

"You'd lost your sword, yet you risked your life for me in the cave." His voice was rough, almost angry. "With only a dagger to stave off the croma."

"And a torch."

He shrugged that off. "You defied death to save me."

"As you would have done for me."

Dropping her hand, he framed her face with both of his. "In the beginning it was a game. Even before the second bout with the cromas the situation had changed, but not until that moment did I understand what had happened to me. I should have remembered what my old tutor once said. 'Think long before you try to trick someone, lest you become the one who is fooled.'"

"I'm not sure I grasp your meaning."

He smiled wryly. "I've fallen in love with you, my sweet warrior."

Merl loved her! Her heart leaped in her chest, then beat three times faster than usual when he kissed her. She reached to hold him, feeling his

arms wrap around her, losing herself in the kiss, wanting nothing more than to have it last forever. As her love for him would last.

He trailed kisses to her ear, whispering, "Wear your robe for me again tonight." Then he let her go.

Aching with need, she pulled the robe from her pack, bringing with it the scent of mint. She turned her back, undressed and slipped on the robe. When she turned back to Merl, she saw he'd placed one blanket on the ground and was laying on it, covered to the waist with the other. His chest was bare, a patch of crinkly hair curling there.

She eased under the blanket, turning to him, and ran her fingers through his chest hair, smiling at the feel of it. His untied the sash of her robe, opened it and pulled her close. The hair rasped against her nipples, the sensation so exquisite she sighed. But when he explored her breasts with his mouth she moaned, so pleasure struck she could no longer think.

With caressing hands and lips he brought her closer and closer to the edge, closer to toppling into that wonderland she'd visited the night before. Though she desperately longed to go there again, she also wanted to give him the intense pleasure he brought to her. She'd made him moan when she caressed his body last night and so she ran her hand over his stomach and down, finding his rigid maleness and stroking it with her fingers until he groaned, the sound exciting her.

How would it feel to mate with him, to join together, male to female? Her secret part throbbed in anticipation and she longed to give herself to

him, to take him in this ancient way.

"Yes," she whispered against his lips. "Yes, I want to."

He started to rise over her and she quivered with eagerness. Yes. Now.

He paused and said, "The Crescent," in a voice so hoarse she hardly understood him.

When the meaning sank in, she tensed and he moved away from her. She turned on her side and burst into tears. How could she have come so close to failing her people?

"I love you," she sobbed. "But I have to deliver the Starlight Crescent to Mizpa."

Merl put his arms around her, but didn't hold her close. "You can do both," murmured.

When the meaning of his words penetrated her misery, she extricated herself and sat up, pulling her robe closed. "How?"

He got up and as began to dress. "Will someone be waiting for you outside the Temple tomorrow?"

"One of the Verbot acolytes."

"I thought as much. Once you leave the Temple you can never return, but you could pass the Crescent through the barrier for the acolyte to retrieve. The Crescent doesn't belong inside the Temple, so it will go through while you remain inside. Then we can be together here forever."

Zareen stared at him, confused. What was he talking about? "But

you've completed your quest. You'll be leaving the Temple tomorrow, too, with the sacred white ahver."

"Get dressed," he said, turning away to place another branch on the fire.

Disturbed, needing the feel of her warrior clothes on her body, she did. When she finished she looked down at him. He'd separated the blankets, placing them several feet apart, and was sitting on his, elbows on his knees, face in his hands. Fear ran a cold finger along her spine.

She eased down on her blanket. "I know I can't return to the Temple Of Time once I leave it, but neither can you. So why did you say we could be here together?"

"I can't leave the Temple. Ever. And it has nothing to do with the dying wizard."

Shocked to the core, she couldn't find any words.

He raised his head and looked at her. "From the beginning, I haven't told you the truth. Except about loving you. I didn't intend love you, but I do."

"You're not on a quest? What about Blanca?"

The white ahver, perched in a nearby tree, chirped.

"She's my creation."

"Your creation? What are you talking about?"

"So is Vorst. That's why I got angry. He isn't supposed to be able to defy me, but this damn Temple twists magic rules like it does the land."

"You didn't come into the Temple with Charis?"

"There is no Charis."

"But-but I saw her."

"A phantasm, as I told you at the time. Likely it's faded by now and is gone."

"You created a phantasm of Charis?"

"Blast it, I don't know why the phantasm appeared. I didn't create one."

"She seemed so real. As real as Blanca or Vorst."

"They *are* real because they are creations. Charis is not. Vorst has decided to go his own way, apart from me. Blanca may do so, too, if she wishes. Apparently neither are bound to me."

"You didn't grant Charis that choice. That's unkind."

He shook his head. "Enough of her. She doesn't exist. I came into the Temple of Time to search for knowledge. I found it, but like a fool, tried to take the books out with me, forgetting that you can't accept anything tangible in this forsaken place. Because I tried, I can never leave."

Zareen's shocked mind finally began to function again. "Even mages can't create truly living beings. Not ones who last."

"True. I couldn't in Tonapa. Inside this Temple I can and did. I'm the only mage in here as far as I can tell."

"There was that old mage on the island."

He shook his head. "I masqueraded as him."

"Oh, dear Litha, that means you were also the blood-taker and shape-changer, the prince and even--even Vrin." She hugged herself, chilled by the realization.

"I wanted you from the first, but I knew you were a Verbot Virgin, so, as I told you, I made a game out of trying to seduce you, wanting to discover what kind of man you would succumb to. Nothing worked, so I finally appeared as myself."

"I suppose Merl isn't your real name, either."

"It's the short form."

"And you even lied about having a wizard great-uncle."

"I do have one near the Trifold Mountains. But the devices I used were mine."

Zareen remembered the worst betrayal of all and drew in her breath. "You! As the old mage you told me you were touching me in my dreams. You disgust me."

Merl spread his hands. "All my games were wrong, were in error. What I didn't expect was to fall in love with you for yourself."

"You deceived me from the beginning. Save your words. I no longer believe any of them." She grabbed her boots and yanked them on, stood and picked up her pack. "I don't intend to wait until morning."

Turning her back to him, she marched toward the trail. To her surprise, the white ahver flew down and perched on her shoulder, lighting her way.

Chapter 13

As Zareen hiked on, the heaviness of heartbreak lightened , replaced by a steady flame of anger. How could she have been such a fool? Believed she loved him? She wouldn't allow herself to disgrace her vows by hating him, since she'd been trained to view hatred as evil.

He'd better not try to follow her, because nothing, nothing at all, could ever make her want to be with him. Once back in Mizpa, she'd be free of him and his magery, she'd never see him again.

Never.

She quashed a prick of pain. He wasn't worth it.

After a time she realized he wasn't following and that made her even angrier. All his protestations of love had obviously been lies since he wasn't

even trying to stop her.

On and on she walked, trying in vain to find serenity. Instead, an image slipped into her mind of Merl as she'd first seen him, staring desolate into the chasm. She tried to brush it away. Charis had been a lie like all the rest. Not a real woman, only a phantasm. One he denied creating. Which might be the truth, since the imaginary Charis was supposed to be dead.

I saw Charis. Twice. At the cliff and near the boat to the island.

Why?

She glanced toward the ahver on her shoulder. "You saw Charis, too, didn't you?"

Blanca gave a double note chirp, surprising Zareen because it sounded like "Charis."

"Maybe you know more than that miserable creator of yours. Just to confound Merl, I wish Charis could become real like you and Vorst."

But that wouldn't happen. Charis was only a made-up woman, a lie to make the Verbot Virgin believe Merl was desolate and alone. Now he really was alone. Served him right.

As fatigue began to replace anger, her steps slowed. Unclouded by fury, her mind brought back fragments of memory. *My sweet warrior*, he'd called her. He'd mentioned playing a game before that, she realized, but she'd been so thrilled by his confession of love, so bemused by his caresses, that she hadn't paid attention. He'd even quoted his mentor: *Think long before you try to trick someone lest you become the one who is fooled.*

The words revolved in her mind. Certainly Merl had tried to trick her, but was it possible he'd been fooled? Had fallen in love with her, however unwillingly? Come to think of it, he'd been the one who'd stopped their mating before it took place. He'd said, "The Crescent," reminding her of her duty to her people before it was too late, even though it was counter to what he wanted.

Much as it galled her to admit that had been a noble act, fair was fair. Was it because he'd suddenly become solicitous about the fate of Mizpa without their Starlight Crescent? Even though the result was losing her? Hard to believe. No, strange as this seemed to her, she believed he'd reminded her for her own sake. Given her the choice. When he didn't have to.

Wasn't that love?

Her throat clogged with sorrow. She'd left him behind. Alone. The only man she would ever love, even if he was a mage. Even if he did deceive her. He might not spend the rest of his days alone, but she would have to.

Blanca launched herself off Zareen's shoulder, startling her. The ahver circled once, chirped twice, then left her, flying back the way they'd come. Peering ahead, Zareen saw the faint glimmer of the entrance barrier. She was almost there.

Her steps faltered, but she recovered and marched resolutely on. When she came close, she paused, noticing the glimmering veil separating

the Temple of Time from the rest of Tonapa looked to be transparent, for surely that was sunlight she could see through it, while inside, where she stood, night ruled.

Was the Temple of Time actually a part of Mizpa? Or even of Tonapa? She shook her head, aware she'd never know the answer. Peering through the barrier, she saw a Verbot acolyte waiting at the foot of the stairs leading to the entrance. When the girl gave no sign of seeing her, Zareen understood for those outside the Temple, the barrier was still a concealing black shroud.

Time to step through, and, with the acolyte, carry the Starlight Crescent triumphantly back to the Doma, who would hand it over with appropriate ceremony to the Dom of the Star Temple. Zareen reached into her pack and carefully removed the Crescent, which glowed more and more brightly, as though anticipating the return to its rightful place.

Holding the Crescent in her hand, she took a step forward. Stopped. Once she crossed to the other side, she could never go into the Temple again. The Doma had warned that that of the very few who had returned several had tried to reenter, but failed to pass through the barrier. One chance was all anyone got.

She'd never see Merl again. Never taste his kiss, feel the wonder of his embrace. She was leaving behind the man she loved. Forever. Tears dimmed her vision

She blinked them back. There was another way.

Cautiously, making sure not to touch the shimmering veil, Zareen knelt and pushed the Crescent forward, sighing in relief when it penetrated the barrier. Leaving only the very tip of one horn inside, because she feared, if her fingers touched the veil, she'd be drawn through, too, Zareen, still on her knees, watched the acolyte. The girl's startled stare faded. After a long moment of hesitation, she climbed the steps, her face fearful. She stood at the stop gazing down at the Crescent and, after a moment, crouched to pick it up.

Zareen didn't realize she'd been holding her breath until she saw the tip of the Crescent on her side vanish as the girl pulled it free. The acolyte rose with the talisman in her hands, cradling it as she hurried down the stairs and turned in the direction of the Verbot Temple.

I've completed my quest. The Starlight Crescent has been returned.

She could still step through, catch up to the acolyte and go back the safety of being a Verbot Virgin.

Zareen shook her head. Living her life with only a memory of love was not enough. Turning her back to the entrance, she started to retrace her steps through the darkness. She'd gone no more than a few feet when someone blocked her path. Even without being able to see him clearly, she knew it was Merl.

"You followed me."

"Not to try to stop you. To be sure you reached safety."

She put her palm against his chest, feeling the beat of his heart. "I

discovered safety isn't what I want, nor what I need. You are."

"Even though I'm a conniving mage?"

"You're still Merl, the man I love."

"No one but you, my sweet warrior, could have made a fool out of a mage by teaching him to love."

He caught her to him, his kiss enclosing her in their own special world, one they'd always inhabit together. What was outside that world no longer mattered to her, or ever would again.

His kiss was tender and far too short. "No need to stay here," he said. "Hold tightly to me and, whatever you do, don't let go."

She wrapped her arms around his waist, he chanted a string of words in that strange language of his and the breath whooshed from her as they were suddenly airborne. In the dark she couldn't tell where they were headed, but, since she'd trusted Merl with her heart, she trusted him in all else.

They eased to the ground beside a dwelling and the door opened to welcome them into a lighted interior. To her surprise, he lifted her into his arms and carried her over the threshold, set her on her feet and closed the door. "Welcome to our home."

She glanced around at spare but beautiful furnishings. "You didn't tell me you had a house. I thought all mages lived in towers."

"There's a tower attached, but I don't live in it, just use it for study. Too unhandy." Taking her hand he led her into a bedroom where luxury reigned.

She looked at the lighted candles that wafted a spicy scent into the air. "Your servants must have known you were coming. Where are they?"

"Mostly invisible."

"You're teasing."

"I can do more than rush all over the place in masquerade, trying to lure a beautiful virgin into making love."

"You needed only to be yourself."

Merl sighed. "Even a mage can't fathom the mind of a woman." He lifted her off her feet and deposited her on the silky fur covering of the bed, then removed her boots, kicking off his own.

He joined her there, pulling her close, and kissed her with such passion that she trembled as its intensity burned through her, lighting fires in all her secret places. Between caresses, he undressed her until she lay naked before him.

"No magic is as wonderful, as beautiful as you," he whispered.

Flinging off his own clothes, he caught her to him in a fierce and demanding kiss that she answered with her own hunger until they were breathless with need. His caresses made her wild and daring enough to touch him everywhere, wanting to make him as weak with pleasure as she

was. She'd never thought of a man's body as being beautiful, but now she did, as she caressed him with her lips as well as her hands.

When he rose over her, she closed her eyes, but he asked her to keep them open. "I want to see what you feel when we come together, want to keep the memory of this time forever."

Slowly he explored the entrance to her secret womanhood, making her arch up needing more. As he slid into her ready moistness she felt a instant of pain that changed into an aching wanting as he eased deeper and deeper inside. She joined him in what her body instinctively knew was the rhythm of love, an ancient dance of mating that struck deep into her heart, telling her this was what she'd been created for.

When the explosion came, taking her to the place only he could bring her, she sensed he felt the same shattering magic.

Afterwards, he held her, enclosing her in their own special world, one they'd always inhabit together. What was outside that world no longer mattered to her, or ever would again.

The End