



Woman of the Mountain
Angela Caperton

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By

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To Adam...

Part 1: The Hawk

Chapter 1

Quiet bustle and drowsy chaos swirled around Casmin as he paused in his packing and stared at the mountain. Ten days into the journey and the dark shape in the distance drew his gaze as if he stared at divinity. A golden shadow on dawn's horizon, the mountain beckoned, calling to the faithful of Corsinium.

Tales of the mountain filled Casmin's early memories in the farming town of Margate. *"In your grandfather's day," his father once said in the congenial, almost playful tone he reserved for his younger son, "the hollow peak sometimes issued long gray plumes of smoke. And longer ages gone, fire and ashes filled the skies and burned the very eyes of those who dared look upon it!"*

"Fire and ash?" Casmin asked, the eager curiosity of an eight-year-old drawing him away from the shining blue marbles at his feet and to the side of his father's chair, ready to hear more.

"Yes, son, in those days, Zenthe cried and the world bled." Casmin's father smiled at him, then leaned

forward and ruffled his hair. "That's an old story. Songs are sung about the fire and ash, and the world suffered terribly, but you must remember this. Zenthe's sorrow burned and blighted, but she is not without compassion. The rich soil that covers the plains, the same soil where we harvest our wheat and hay; that is her blessing, the memory of ancient pain. Her sorrow gave us the bounty to feed a kingdom."

Now, his journey almost done, the mountain in view, Casmin's head swirled with the stories he'd heard all his life about the temple. Built within the rim of the mountain's crater, Zenthe's citadel grew as if alive, marble and ivory, flawless and clean, towers, white walls, and vast halls that spilled over the slope, in places almost to the plains and forests below.

Growing up under the careful cultivation of his father and mother, Margate's master gardeners, Casmin first learned his destiny lay with the temple and the mountain when he was very young. *"That one is marked," his mother had said. "He's going to the temple when he's of age."*

Casmin blinked back his reverie as the sharp voice of the caravan warden called out to rouse the last of the drowsing travelers.

"Ten minutes! Up! Up!"

Casmin finished tying his bedroll and slung his pack onto his back. Clangs and sleep-gravel voices filled the air as he moved to the edge of the camp and looked toward the mountain again. His

homeland of Margate and the wasteland frontier that lay a day's ride farther north seemed a world away, and Casmin knew his entire life had been a preparation for this time, for this moment, for his service to the temple, and the honor of his family.

When Casmin was twelve, his father unexpectedly took him on a tour of the orchards on the far western border of their estate. Upon sleek mares, they rode and laughed through the long afternoon. He watched in silent fascination as his father engaged the overseer, stressing the importance of the harvest that loomed but a few scant weeks away. As they rode back toward home, the tone of his father's voice changed from jovial to earnest, the same tone he'd used with the overseer.

"Son, I know you will not understand all of this right now, but as you grow older and see more of the world, you will. Our estate seems large to you, our holdings rich."

"I have never wanted for anything, Father."

Casmin's father smiled at him. "And by Zenthe, you never will." He fell silent for several moments, the rhythmic clop of their horses' hooves the only sound between them. "I will not live forever, Casmin. When I get older, your brother will have my trade and your sisters will share the lands of the estate."

He reached out and ruffled Casmin's hair. "I

have no physical inheritance for you, Casmin, but what I do have for you is the finest opportunity any young man might be given.

"When you are eighteen, you will go to the temple to be trained as one of Zenthe's warriors, the noble men who serve the priestesses and keep them safe. As far back as our name has been tied to Margate, men from our clan have had this honor. Some have returned to Margate later in their lives, but most have stayed at the temple until they grew old. The priestesses take very good care of the old soldiers, I hear."

"You...want me to go away?" Casmin looked at his father, the love he held in his heart threatening tears at the thought of leaving his family and the quiet village of Margate.

His father fell silent, his face a crease of consternation. "Truth, Casmin is, yes, I do want you to leave us. This is not a decision lightly made, but it is the choice I make to best serve you. You will learn the ways of a soldier and be part of Zenthe's guard. Few are given such honor. If you stay in Margate, all you will have is your name.

"You are my joy, son, and I will miss you, but I will also be filled with pride and happiness knowing you will have a good life."

On the night of Casmin's thirteenth birthday, his father followed tradition and sent the bonds announcing Casmin's appointment to the service

of Zenthe. Casmin remembered well the jests from older boys about the temple, and the rosy color in the cheeks of his sisters when they talked of the goddess and her rites.

In that year and in the years that followed, Casmin struggled with the unkind hand of adolescence. His ears and hands grew long before his arms and legs, and though well-shaped, his limbs did not always perform with smooth precision. He found no favor with the village girls, some of whom were quite free in their ways and might well become priestesses if the local temple needed them. But Casmin respected all women, lessons well learned from his mother and father. He regarded the local girls, the wanton and the chaste ones alike, with a touch of reverence and an apprehension that sometimes bordered on panic when he was forced into close contact with them.

Now, in the dawn light, almost in the shadow of the mountain, Casmin slipped his fingers into the pocket of his trousers, the reassuring caress of parchment easing a sudden moment of concern. Still there, safely tucked away.

The day called Spring's Kiss marked his eighteenth birthday. Gifts and laughter ruled the day, but so did the official summons from the temple. Scribed in golden ink, Casmin's name shone like a secret treasure upon the creamy paper, with a red wax seal, a rose, cloven and

open, the goddess' own mark of favor, beckoning him to start his journey southward.

Three days later, his heart filled with excitement and a little fear, he bade farewell to his father and his mother, endured his brother's wink and jest, and kissed each of his sisters in turn, treasuring their wishes for eternal good fortune.

At Turnspit, on the Great Eastern Road, Casmin waited a day until the Caravan of the Whale arrived from the southwest, a line of dusty riders and groaning wagons. He presented his summons to the master of the caravan and, when they rolled on, turning south, toward the mountain and beyond, Casmin traveled with them, in the charge of a gray-haired Zenthen guard named Fesek who rode a massive horse the color of charcoal.

By the fire of their camp that first night, Fesek gave Casmin a tunic of the same rich golden color as his own.

"Ain't no reason for you to walk all the way to the temple, lad. I arranged for ye to ride in one of the wagons." The broad grin on Fesek's face as he told Casmin the news did not go unnoticed, but Casmin did not question the old soldier.

In the morning, Casmin climbed into back of a wagon filled with fertile seed and honey; a huge cart covered with a hood of linen, pulled by six oxen and driven by two sisters, the daughters of a Turnspit merchant. The girls, one dark and one

fair, giggled at Casmin when he was given into their care and the dark-haired one's gaze lingered on him until his cheeks burned and the familiar discomfort of his youth stirred in his belly.

As he traveled in the rich-scented wagon across the green plains of Corsinium, Casmin began to understand the kiss of Spring, of the magic of renewal that gave wealth to the land. The warming days fed the grasses and trees of the vast plain and the air quickened the blood of all living beings, the travelers in the caravan just as much as the rutting deer they passed along the way.

The rolling cart lulled him and, often on the journey, he slept. Each night, when the caravan stopped on the green beside some small town, Casmin restlessly wandered among the other travelers, admiring the strange clothing some of them wore, growing intoxicated by exotic scents, and listening to the music of conversation and song. Every campfire rang with different tales, although most shared the common themes of right over wrong and destinies fulfilled.

There were well over one hundred men and women in the Caravan of the Whale. The most visible contingent was a band of riders Fesek called the Hawk's men. More than a dozen leather-skinned horse warriors, dressed in dark silk with trim black beards and eyes that dismissed Casmin, and everyone else, as

unworthy of notice. They camped by themselves and shunned all attempts by others to visit their circle.

"Watch that one," Fesek told Casmin, over a shared chicken and a pot of beans the fourth night on the road. The gray-haired guard nodded toward the man who led the warriors. "He is the Hawk, and has slain more men than there are blades of grass in all the wasteland. He raised a city out of the Ilokai ruins and united the tribes of the near desert."

The Hawk towered over his men. With wide shoulders and a hard body, he exuded strength and control. He wore the same trim beard as his warriors, but also a finely curving moustache that overhung his mouth and gave him an expression of fierce disdain, like the shadow of his scorn for all lesser mortals. Even at a distance, his laugh rang louder than his men's, and every one of the warriors treated him with stern deference, both in the camp and on the highway when he rode among them.

"Watch him closely," Fesek said again, his voice heavy with uncertainty. "For he may well become our lord."

Casmin tore his gaze from the fierce leader, and stared at Fesek. "What do you mean?"

Fesek looked at his plate of food for a moment, then continued to eat, leaving Casmin's question

unanswered.

As if newly born on each day of the journey, Casmin marveled at the strange and exotic character of the Caravan of the Whale. From the great, tusked creatures that drew one cart to the strange slender musicians who rode in a carriage the color of mint, every day brought new sights and new sensations. Even the merchant's daughters who drove Casmin's wagon, seemed more like divine spirits than mere mortals.

"I'm Janee," the fair lass told Casmin the first day, "and that's Benessa." She playfully shoved the dark-haired girl as she chuckled the reins of the oxen team to her.

"Casmin," he told them, nodding his head respectfully as he struggled to kneel in the back of the wagon. For four years on this route, the girls had driven their wagon bearing seed and honey to the temple, and Casmin learned they had often carried the temple recruits called from the outer lands.

At twenty summers old, Janee exuded ultimate authority over her small wagon world, in spite of her sister only lagging behind her in age by a year. Casmin liked sitting near them as they drove the oxen, inhaling the warm smell of the grain and the girls' scents, like spice and flowers. Even the stink of the oxen, rich and natural in the spring air, added distinction to the experience.

At each crossroads along the journey, travelers left the caravan and others joined, though the core remained the same. The Hawk increased his entourage as another mounted company joined them at Wengoh, until it seemed that half the travelers wore black silk.

Fesek glanced at the ebon troops, shook his head and spat on the ground. "We ain't nothin' to them folk. You, me, the girls, we just bits of dust under their boots. That Hawk, he's got his plan all laid out and, ain't nothin' going to distract him from his goal."

Casmin carried the golden tunic Fesek gave him, but did not don it those early days of the journey, uncertain if he was entitled, leaving it folded with his pack in the back of Janee's wagon. As the caravan slowly moved toward the mountain that morning, and as the mountain grew larger with each passing mile, excitement at his new life filled him with eagerness to wear the gold and be known as Zenthe's chosen.

By the end of that day, the mountain loomed over nearby trees, the sprawling white temple like snow on its peak. Ahead, the road slowly inclined upward, following the descending turns of a nearby stream that flowed and gurgled like the laughter of the earth itself. When the wagons stopped for the night, the travelers camped on gently sloping green banks in air cleaned by the

forest beneath a sunset sky as clear as golden amber.

Casmin made his way down to the stream and found a place where bushes gave him some shelter. He stripped off the clothes of his town and his clan and reveled in the cool spring air. He drew a deep breath and then plunged naked into the water to bathe. When he emerged, Benessa sat on the bank, holding his golden tunic in her lap. The clothes he had removed were nowhere in sight. He blushed and laughed, lingering at the stream's edge, though the shallow water gave him no cover, nor was the bank high enough to hide him from her gaze.

"My clothes, Benessa, please. The sun is setting and the air is cooling. You would not want me to get chilled."

"You will not get cold." She smiled at him, warm and promising.

Casmin covered himself as best he could, catching his cock in his hand as he edged toward the girl, hiding it from her.

Benessa regarded him with an appraising glint in her eyes. Her dark hair fell around her shoulders, over a simple white blouse and a skirt the color of ripe grain. Her legs, bare to the thigh, were a shade paler than the skirt, long and golden as the dawn, her feet bare and slender. As he drew near her, she half turned and, with arms raised,

she lifted the white blouse over her shoulders, her tanned back turned to him for a moment, like wheat, supple and vibrant, before she turned again. Casmin stared at the glorious beauty of her breasts, nipples stiff and dark, the muscles of her stomach tight as she cast the tunic aside and opened her arms to him.

Breathless, he drew near her, his attention caught by the fall of darkness across shoulders pale as cream and the swelling brown points of her breasts. His cock quickly grew beyond any hope of hiding and Casmin spread his arms and smiled at the merchant's daughter.

She caught his hands, hers like burning coals, her fingers caressing his wrists; her thumbs insistent in his palms, skin seeking skin with fevered purpose. She pulled herself to him and he instinctively embraced her, her breasts crushing against his wet chest, heat and the cool caress of the evening air, like lightning down his stomach. He ground against her, his hard length probing the skirt that she was already struggling to free herself of. Her hands guided his to her hip and breast, then the skirt fell. They joined her clothing on the ground, her glorious golden legs wrapping around his waist as she pulled him to her.

Beneath the skirt, she wore a single garment of white cotton, barely concealing her sex. Lustrous dark hair peeked over the cotton band. Her legs

moved with expert precision, her feet curving to grip his calves, the heat of her body like summer fire against him. Her dark eyes echoed the question on her lips, as she stroked his chest and shoulders.

“Have you known a woman before, Casmin?”

A fluttering like the wings of a bird filled his stomach. “Oh, aye, of course,” he answered, his voice wispy and uncertain.

“Of course you have,” Benessa grinned. She untied the cotton at her waist and dismissed the simple girding.

Casmin remembered the times he had seen naked women in Margate, their garments cast aside for certain summer rites, but never had he been so close, touching, thrilling at the mystery and magic of woman’s flesh. Benessa gently guided him, his hands uncertain as they touched her, though she arched into his strokes and rewarded him with kisses and soft bites.

Entwined, Casmin realized that the swollen red head of his cock lay only a finger’s length from the open flower of her sex. Before he could think further on the amazement of the moment, Benessa took his length into her hand and guided him into the treasure of her pussy.

The wet heat stole his senses. Casmin rocked back on his haunches, as she pressed him onto his back, her hands shaping his shoulders, his hips

and buttocks, his legs. She guided him until she sat astride him, his hard length buried completely in her, his thoughts gone to flame, obliterated by the sweet cunt that held him in a velvet grip, by the vision of her beauty above him, and the dusk-shadowed desire in her eyes.

She moved, steady and sure; her breath quickened and Casmin moved with her, the pulse of her body in his groin beyond his wildest dreams, the very rhythm of the spring filling his soul. The rush of the stream and the stars in the darkening violet sky became a part of the moment, a molten song of pure ecstasy.

"Now," Benessa groaned, her sweet, tight cunt closing on him with mind-destroying pressure. She shifted her legs under him again, pulling him up and over her, so that, in a breath, he was atop her, still buried deep in her, her legs tight around him.

The rhythm began again, two bodies suddenly one. Fever filled her gaze.

Casmin began to thrust, deeper in her than he had yet been, sliding easily through her flesh as it closed around him, tight. He sensed the single heart that beat between them and with each thrust matched its rhythm, the heat rising from his prick into his back and his stomach, one pulse, relentless.

The slick tunnel of her sex crushed him in a

lush vice as Benessa cried out, her eyes closed and her lips parted, speaking the unspoken prayer, uttering short throaty moans. The pressure in Casmin's back became unbearable, his chest and loins rushing out of him, his eyes gone blind for a moment, gone into the sheer, obliterating magic of her body as he came hard, his seed adding more heat to her already molten cunt.

He ground against her, slowing, bliss turning to calm wonder as he emptied himself into her, endless. She opened her eyes and he looked into them. In that instant he loved her, loved her as truly as he loved the spring and the green grass. He fell atop her, holding tight, reveling in the cooling heat of her skin and the rough kiss of the ground as they rolled, laughing.

After a time, she pulled away from him gently. She kissed him before rising and returning to the place she had been sitting. With a shy smile, she offered him the golden tunic of the goddess' warriors. Casmin donned it while she watched, her naked perfection ivory in the fading light.

The golden leather fit him well and Casmin knew he looked good in it, even before Benessa, still delightfully naked, threw her arms about him and kissed him, "The goddess will be proud of you. You will serve her so well." She kissed him again and again, until Casmin wondered if he dreamed such delight.

She pulled away, resolute, and then, much to Casmin's disappointment, Benessa dressed. Clothed, she took his hand and led him back to the camp where Janee watched them, amusement dancing in her gaze. Benessa whispered to her sister and Janee laughed, leaving Casmin to wonder at the extent of the secrets shared. They both regarded him for a long moment, mischief shining in their expressions.

Then the two sisters departed, leaving him alone to contemplate his new life, suddenly as golden as the tunic he wore.

Casmin passed the night, alternately dreaming and waking beneath a sky of jeweled constellations, half hoping that Benessa would come to him, though she did not. When he woke in the morning and took his place in the back of their wagon, both girls greeted him with smiles and kisses. The caravan formed slowly, everyone aware that the temple awaited them an easy day's journey ahead. Laughter and conversation rang through the long line of travelers; even the Hawk's men seemed more jovial. The caravan master raised his voice only to his oxen; no harsh words lanced a lagging cart or walker. For the first time since journey's start, haste against the fall of night did not stalk the Caravan of the Whale. Dust rose golden in the spring dawn, the wheels and hoof beats in cadence with the beat of Casmin's heart as

he embraced his last hours before entering the service of the goddess.

He noticed almost immediately that Benessa had dressed in her drover's garb, practical pants and a man's coarse shirt, but Janee wore a shift the color of pine needles, a loose-fitting garment that molded around her breasts and played at the hem with the slightest of breezes. As the cart moved and the breeze fluttered over the caravan, Janee's skirt blew up in inches, until her golden thighs were half-exposed while she sat on the wagon's seat. Casmin's cock grew hard as he rode behind the girls, their presence working a spell upon him that quickened his breath and his pulse.

The road rose slowly, winding up through arbors and occasional vineyards that cloaked the foothills. The road dipped sometimes, then turning to reveal the mountain in all its majesty, bigger than anything Casmin could have ever imagined, no longer rising before them, but *upon* them, looming to fill the horizon and obliterate it. The white structures of the temple gleamed in the spring sunshine, slender towers and graceful domes nestled among the ash-gray rock of the crater's rim and the tumbled striations of the slope.

Just after mid-day, after Casmin had shared a loaf of dark, sweet bread with the girls, he saw Janee lean close to her sister, the golden blonde

fall of her hair blowing like a halo around both of them as they exchanged whispers Casmin could not hear over the rumbling creak of the wagon. Then Janee turned in her seat, a smile playing on her lips, and motioned for Casmin to move back into the covered dimness of the wagon. He complied as best he could, half-kneeling and swaying in the space between the casks, a narrow band of wood covered with burlap, wide enough for him to crouch with his knees against the casks and bags. He waited, excitement growing in his belly as he watched Janee swing gracefully from her seat, the sunlight behind her shining through the green cotton so he saw the shadows of her legs and the swelling curve of her hips and breasts.

Janee's golden hair fell around her face as she settled before him. The green dress rode up, giving him a glimpse of the shadow of her sex. She followed the track of his gaze and her smile broadened. Reaching up, she opened a panel in the canopy of the wagon. A shaft of brilliant sunlight penetrated the dimness of the wagon, Casmin blinked until the glare became bearable. As his vision cleared, his breath caught as the welcomed light fell on Janee like a showman's spotlight and danced in the blue depths of her eyes. She leaned forward and kissed him.

"My sister says you are a natural lover," she whispered between inviting kisses, "and that she

was honored to be your guide yesterday, but where she is a guide, I am a teacher, and you have lessons to learn in the hours before we reach the temple."

"And I will be your willing student," Casmin whispered, as he looked past her, a little apprehensive, the dark head of her sister in full view where she sat, driving the oxen. Benessa did not turn, but Casmin didn't doubt that she listened to what was transpiring in the wagon behind her. If she did not object to her sister's plan, how could he?

Janee's graceful hands unfastened Casmin's tunic and traced ribbons of fire on his chest and stomach, peeling the golden leather from his shoulders. She kissed his throat and the line of his jaw as her hands worked downward, loosing his belt, one bold finger making a trail through the thicket of dark hair and along the veined, growing length of his cock. She let Casmin's garment fall around them, making a pallet of sorts to pad the jostling floor of the wagon, then she knelt and looked at him, her eyes shining with admiration, her lips parted in an O of approval. She leaned forward and kissed the head of his cock. He jumped a little as a crackling of lightning lanced his backbone.

Casmin took her tentatively by the shoulders, unsure of what to do next. Eyes gleaming with a

mixture of lust and delight, she began his education.

“Undress me, Casmin. Savor the sights you uncover, for much of the power of love lies in anticipation.” She raised her hands above her head and stretched, head back and eyes closed as he caught the waist of her shift and drew it up, exposing the rounded beauty of her thighs, the curve of her hips, and the gold-fringed cleft of her sex. Her stomach was flat and tight, the navel ornamented with a golden bead, and her breasts were round, the color of cream, and tipped with small nipples that pointed enthusiastically at the canopy overhead. Casmin drew the dress over her up-stretched arms. She took it from him and cast it aside. She posed a moment in the golden beam of sunlight, her long fingers dancing over stiff nipples and down the line of her stomach to the tangle of golden curls between her legs. Her fingers moved slowly, massaging her sex in a most recognizable rhythm.

Casmin’s gaze settled where her fingers delved, his cock only moments from exploding and he had not even touched her yet.

Janee watched him, her lips parted in a warm smile, the tip of her tongue red and wet when she licked her lips.

She kissed him and stroked his cock, her stiff nipples dancing over his chest. Breathless with

desire, Casmin pulled her to him, but her hand against his shoulder held him back.

"Wait." She drew back from him a bit and settled onto her knees. The sunbeam fell directly on the glistening line of her sex. "Watch," she said, her breath hard and her eyes shining.

With two slender fingers, she caressed her magic cleft again, parting the golden curls and the lips of her pussy. "Here, the Goddess' gift. The flower is sweet, pretty Casmin, but the bud is sweeter." Her fingers expertly teased the lips wider and a swelling appeared between them, a narrow line of pink flesh that gleamed in the sunlight. "Put your fingers in me, Casmin."

Reverently, he reached out and touched her, marveling at the wet heat. His forefinger slipped easily into her and he felt the mystery, the pulse that echoed in his cock and in his heart. "More," she said, and he put another finger into her and then another. Janee moaned, closed her eyes, and began to rock against his hand, using the motion of the wagon to set the pace. Her juices ran over his fingers and Casmin held his breath as he realized how easily his cock would slide into the heated tunnel.

"To hasten, sweet Casmin," Janee explained between gasps, "cheats your lady and yourself. Touch me there, on the goddess' gift."

He turned his hand so that his thumb lay

against the swollen clit at the heart of the flower. She took his hand and showed him how to massage the sensitive flesh.

Her gasps turned to little screams as she rocked, and sweat beaded on her breasts. Her heat filled him too, in his body and in his spirit.

He ached to fuck her.

Janee suddenly reached out and grabbed the back of his head. She brought him closer to her, still holding his hand in place, and with the slightest shift of her wrists, showed him by touch how to take her to paradise. Her lips invited and Casmin crushed them with his mouth, his tongue twining with hers in a fiery kiss. He reveled in the firm line of her breasts against him and growled with delight as she gave way and pulled him down.

She turned under him so that she rested on her knees. His fingers withdrew from her, and, wedged between the barrels and the bags, she leaned back and thrust her smooth, pale ass toward him, opening herself. "Now," she said, as much a plea as a demand, and she reached back to stroke his rigid, aching cock.

The gates opened between her legs, pinned in the sunbeam, dripping from the assault of his hand, the lips swollen and ready. Casmin rested the head of his cock at the threshold for only a moment, and then pushed into tight, wet paradise.

Janee screamed a little as he entered her. For a moment, he wondered what Benessa must think, for surely she could hear, but the sister did not turn nor give any sign.

He penetrated Janee until his hips pressed tight against her bottom. Sweat and heat bound them, as if they fucked at the heart of a flame, the friction as he drew back divine and tight, and even better when he thrust again, instinct guiding him.

He groaned with pleasure as he rose rapidly toward climax. His hands massaged the globes of her smooth ass and supple back, marveling at the satin skin and smooth muscles that undulated just below the surface.

With determined desperation, Janee caught his left hand in hers and he let her take it, supporting himself with his right hand, gripping her hip hard. She guided his touch down the rippling heat of her torso to the place his cock rode in and out with slick precision. "There," she guided his fingers as she had before to the stiff bud of her clit.

Clumsiness marked the first few strokes, but Janee's guidance smoothed his efforts to perfection. His fingers grew deft and certain in their strokes, until she released his hand and gave herself entirely to the fever born between them.

The wagon rocked and, for a moment, Casmin smelled the honey and the grain with unnatural power that turned the scents to color and sunlight.

The light behind his eyes became golden as he thrust hard into her, the pulse of pleasure became thunder as he came hard, emptying himself into her. She screamed like a woman whose mind had fled and pushed her ass against him, the muscles of her pussy contracting hard to pull him deeper, milking him.

Casmin caught her in a fierce hug as the last of his essence pumped into her, his hands devouring her breasts and stomach. Janee's sweet laughter crowned the moment as she collapsed happily beneath him. He sat back, letting her inch forward, before she turned and smiled up at him, her blue eyes full of promises.

"We have an hour before we reach the temple," she said. "When you are ready, I will teach you more."

The sunlight showered her body, rich and golden gleaming on the wet patch of blond, pearls among the pretty fur, and Casmin stirred again already.

Janee's eyes widened in approval and she reached out to give him an encouraging stroke.

She gave him his second lesson slowly and almost peacefully, their bodies already learning the shape of the other, the single pulse natural, a part of their rhythm when they fucked, maybe afterwards even when they talked or simply stood one near the other.

Janee guided him through the timing of his strokes, giving his butt a hard squeeze each time he made her moan, licking and biting his shoulders and the tight muscle of his neck while he sank deeper and deeper into her with each thrust. She was dripping wet from the first coupling and he slid into her and out again with perfect, natural movements even as her cunt squeezed and held him when she thrust her hips to meet him.

The surge of ecstasy rose in his center; he heard it echoed in her voice, the moans becoming continuous, her hand gripping his bottom hard with sharp nails, his skin alive with touching her, nourished by the sweat that ran like love's own blood between them.

He came in a long, mind-wiping rush of pleasure, heard the echo in Janee's scream, the laughter and cries of men and women in the caravan, as though they celebrated Casmin's orgasm, but the words Benessa shouted back at them told Casmin all he truly needed to know.

"Good timing, sweet sister," she called with a laugh. "Best get dressed. We're here. We're at the temple."

Chapter 2

The courtyard of the fortress of Zenthe occupied a vast terrace, cut into the sloping side of the mountain, just below the crater's rim. Casmin tried to imagine how many laborers must once have worked to build so imposing a structure. Maybe, as some legends had it, Zenthe cut the temple into the rocks with her own cries of bliss. As the road wound the last steps — uphill, but easy with the jubilation of arrival — Casmin stared in awe at the face of the rock in the thick plateau that had been cut from the mountain. He saw the fire rock old as mankind and the weathered stone of the first buildings that had been built there, long before anyone kept records of such details.

He sat in his place behind the sisters, wearing the golden tunic of his new post. His heart swelled with amazement and happiness. No one had ever told him the act of love held so much magic, and yet Casmin knew it colored every stone he saw,

every sound he heard. The stories from older boys and men back in Margate had spoken of their own pleasure, but never of the binding Casmin had felt, the sense of his soul meeting Benessa's and then Janee's. He wondered what would happen if he bedded both of them at the same time. Such things were not uncommon in the temple. But he considered, though these girls were most worldly and direct in their passion, they were not priestesses and the suggestion might insult them. No, Casmin would be grateful for what he had already shared and would not tempt their jealousy or wrath.

He stroked the hair of the sisters, light and dark, and, when they smiled over their shoulders at him, his own smile threatened to turn to laughter at the sheer wonder of all they had shown him.

The caravan moved slowly through high, white gates, carved perhaps of gigantic bones. Under the direction of men in golden tunics, the wagons and carts dispersed, Casmin's carrier rolling to the storehouses that lined the mountainside. A short flight of broad stairs, white stone set into the ancient black rock, and wider than the biggest road Casmin had ever seen, led upward to a second, open gate. As Benessa drove the oxen on to the warehouses, Casmin watched as the black ranks of the Hawk's men drew up in formation at

the base of the steps. Liveried women received their horses and a woman Casmin guessed must be a priestess, raven-haired and dressed in cloth as sheer as the gleam of gold, greeted them and bade them welcome.

Casmin helped unload the wagon, while the sisters met and talked quietly with a gray-haired woman. The warehouse workers made jokes about his tunic, but Casmin didn't care. His senses still reeled from the wonder of the day.

"You get up there, you'll find not all of them ladies is exactly slender. Gimme that barrel. You'll need the practice of haulin' it."

"Naw, but he's the lucky bastard. Gets a job fuckin', instead of just fuckin' off, like you do, Toma."

Casmin laughed with them, but he wondered where Fesek was, and exactly where he should report. The girls returned to the wagon, smiling, and watched as Casmin and the other men finished unloading it.

Even dressed in driver's gear, Benessa shone like a dark rose, and Janee wore only the thin shift she had donned just as the caravan had entered the courtyard. The workers stared, first at the girls, then at Casmin with undisguised envy.

"Come, dear Casmin," Janee purred, as she stepped forward to take his hand. She smiled radiantly, as she led him away from the wagon

and the warehouse, in the direction of the broad, white steps.

"Lucky bastard indeed," one of the workers murmured as Casmin parted.

Janee walked at his right hand and Benessa at his left. Their sandaled feet crunched against the glassy sand that covered the terrace, as they approached the steps.

"Welcome, Casmin, warrior of the lady," Benessa said, and kissed him.

"You will serve the temple well." Janee stroked his dark hair. "I hope we will see you again."

"Oh, I hope it with all my heart!" he cried, looking back and forth between them. "I think I should go . . . up there," he pointed up the stairs. The Hawk's men had already dispersed, but there was constant traffic of men and women up and down the way.

"We will go with you," Benessa said, smiling. "We will present you to the captain and we will tell the goddess all we have done. Perhaps we will see you at the rite tomorrow."

"Rite?" Casmin asked, hardly following what Benessa said.

"Come," Janee said, pulling at his hand and they started up the stairs. "Yes, the first rite of the ascension. Tomorrow night. I do not know what your part will be, but if our sisters do not put you to good use, well . . . they will learn."

"Your sisters?" Casmin heard the surprise in his own voice.

"Oh yes, sweet boy." Benessa regarded him with a smile that was purest mischief. "Not all of the goddess' priestesses wear robes."

* * * *

The corridor outside the Chamber of Zenthe stood empty, the marble floor reflecting the subtle flicker of the lantern's flames. On the high walls, beautiful, detailed mosaics of Zenthe portrayed the history of the goddess, her face and appearance changing with each new incarnation, each panel displaying trials overcome, triumphs of love, of passions unbound, and of life renewed by flesh entwined. In the morning, the hall would be a chaos of priestesses and supplicants, pilgrims and pledges. On the morrow, the Feast of Promise would be celebrated and High Priestess Adita would preside over the rites and rituals of that celebration from her silk throne within the Chamber.

Rivah's bare feet made no sound on the cold marble floor. For months, she had dedicated her energies to her studies, eager to please and impress the priestesses and governesses who served Zenthe as educators and mentors. She stopped before the massive bronze double doors

that separated the Chamber from the rest of the temple. Closing her eyes, she strained to hear any sound. If the High Priestess was nearby or in the Chamber, Rivah would have seen Adita's guard, but the halls were quiet. This time would not come again soon. Squashing the small fear that turned in her stomach, she caressed the thick bronze handle of one of the massive doors. The cool metal rod rose the height of the panel, intricately carved to resemble strong staves of summer wheat. At the top of the door, the full grain heads fanned out as if waving to the sun above, thanking it for the kiss of life. She closed her fingers around the edge of the rod and gently pulled the door open. Silent as mist, the door swung easily on balanced hinges, her slight effort rewarded with entrance into the forbidden chamber. Rivah slipped silently through the portal, letting the big door close behind her, her breath catching as she stared at the Chamber in awe.

Where the marble floors in the hall were polished to a mirror-like finish, the floor of the Chamber seemed to be made of still water, stretching before her enticingly. Faint blue light cast by diamond lanterns turned the room into a palace of ice. The massive, carved marble pillars that lined the chamber disappeared upward, as though into heaven, yet high above her, Rivah saw the beauty of the intricate scrollwork and inspired

mosaics that further captured the story of Zenthe illuminated by lamps, seemingly distant as the stars of the firmament. Rivah had spent two weeks working in the chamber with the other novices in preparation for the Rite, scrubbing and polishing, but the scaffolding and tarps had hidden most of the ceiling from view, mysteries to be revealed.

She had been proud of her work in the chamber, in spite of its menial nature, and, when the novices were told to return to their studies, Rivah had lingered.

"May I see the Chamber when it is ready?" she asked, as humbly as she had ever asked for anything in her life.

"Sister, you will not see the Chamber after today, not for a very long time, if ever. The First Priestess will bless it tomorrow, then only the ordained may enter."

Anger simmered deep in Rivah's belly. "What of the pilgrims, governess? They will enter."

The arched eyebrow of the governess and the swollen silence of the other novices rankled Rivah.

"The pilgrims are guests. They are not servants of Zenthe, but disciples. We serve them, as we serve her." With a sharp clap of her hands, the governess had shooed Rivah down the hall toward the living quarters.

Now she grinned as she stepped into the Chamber. No lightning struck her down nor did

the earth shake. "Their rules, not yours," Rivah whispered to the shrouded marble image of Zenthe that nearly touched the ceiling behind the raised dais and silk-draped throne that would be occupied by the High Priestess during the Rite.

Silent as breath, Rivah padded to the closest pillar. Her fingers thrilled as they slid over the smooth marble veins. Against the walls, mountains of pillows covered the floor in a sea of color and texture. The pillows, some as large as a bed, others so small as to be held in one hand, would cushion and entertain the participants of the Rite. Rivah drew a deep breath as her pulse began to race. She stepped away from the protection of the column's shadow and went to the pillows, impulse trumping caution as she let herself fall into the thick carpet of silks, satins, velvets, and leather. Rivah giggled as a small peach-sized pillow bounced up and fell to earth again, tapping her on the nose in its descent. Someday, she would lie on these pillows again, pilgrim lovers and priestesses stroking her skin, suckling at her breasts, plunging their cocks or fingers or ceremonial phalluses deep into her cunt.

She sat up abruptly, anger tearing her reverie to shreds. Someday, but not yet.

Novices were taught the rituals and rites, but were not permitted to participate until ordained. How she chafed under the rules! She despised

many of the novices, unskilled and unknowing in the arts of sex in spite of their age and calling. Rivah knew in her class at least two who had already been proclaimed for the life of a governess or maiden of Zenthe, but Rivah knew she was destined for much more. One day she would be First Priestess, maybe even High Priestess if Adita faltered, but for now, she was only a novice and denied the pleasures of the order.

"Rubbish," she whispered harshly to the statue of Zenthe, the massive blue silk shroud that covered the statue's face still in the quiet hall. "I am ready now, my goddess, ready to serve you." Rivah's hands stroked her breasts through the thin material of her pale, golden robe, the nipples hardening instantly at the sudden attention. "Ready to be your vessel." Rivah's right hand slid down her belly, her eager fingers curling into the curve of her sex, stroking through the material, teasing her cunt to instant wetness. She arched, her blood beginning to pound in her veins. Her trespass into this chamber added another level to the excitement, turning the sweet tension in her belly and the growing ache in her core into a heady mix she could barely control. Her hand ceased its sweet work long enough to pull her robe up around her waist, then her fingers found new meaning as they slipped into the folds of her damp pussy, stroking and teasing her clit until her

soft moans rippled across the quiet chamber. Deep, her fingers plunged, slick with her own juices, easily one, then two, then three together, pumping in a growing frenzy. She ground against the pillows, the velvet and silk caressing her skin like cool hands, and her mind wandered, dreaming, the caress of the pillows becoming the touch of strong, handsome disciples who would one day fuck her in every conceivable way, all in the name of Zenthe.

Her hips moved against one hand, and the other mercilessly teased the nipples of her breasts. In moments, Zenthe would bless her with sweet, shattering bliss.

Then, as if someone had struck the high tower's massive gong, the sound of something at the door shocked Rivah from her ecstasy of self-worship. Fear squelched all desire, and while the deep ache in her sex would easily disappear, Rivah reacted decisively. If she were found in the Chamber, she could be dismissed from the temple. Quick as lightning, she rose from the pillows, tossing an armful of them lightly into the air to obliterate any trace of her body's outline from the pile of color and texture, then she darted into the deep shadows of the nearest column, hiding.

Light from beyond the chamber spilled onto the shimmering blue surface, the long shadow of two people cutting a hole in the illumination. Rivah's

heart pounded in her chest as she held her breath, praying the two intruders would leave.

“Shh...,” a whispered hiss, decidedly feminine, echoed in the chamber.

Like a voice from a deep well, a man, louder, and by his slight slur, drunk. “Ye’re a wicked one, Moya.”

Moya! The First Priestess!

A throaty giggle filled the chamber, then the light from the corridor narrowed away as the door closed behind the newcomers.

“Tomorrow I will belong to the Rite, but tonight, dear Tornak, is my time to choose, and I choose you.” Another giggle echoed as Rivah dared peek around the pillar to see the pair racing toward the dais. Smoothly, silently, Rivah moved around the pillar to its far side, keeping herself from their view.

In moments she heard the unmistakable sounds of clothing being shed, and the sighs, chuckles and growls of foreplay. She sank to the base of the pillar, realizing she was stuck there; she couldn’t leave without the First Priestess seeing her.

Rivah heard the unmistakable sounds of flesh on flesh, the rolling rhythm that ebbed and flowed with quickening breath as the First Priestess and her playmate explored pleasure. Rivah’s own juices began to flow, her body eager to join in the fun. Aroused and curious beyond reason, she

cautiously peeked around the column and almost gasped aloud as saw the bare, muscled legs of the man Tornak and the naked body of Moya, the blanket of her ebony hair cascading down her back as she rode him upon the throne that was the sacred seat of Zenthe. Only the High Priestess was ever to occupy the throne, and, as Rivah watched, stunned by the countless taboos Moya broke, other sensations hummed within her soul like bees in a well-tended hive; excitement and promise.

Rivah rose, the smile on her face belying the pounding of her heart. She knew her plan was a gamble, but she also knew this was a moment that, if played right, was purest opportunity. And, after all, did not Zenthe teach her daughters to embrace the gifts of life?

The first steps were the most dangerous and Rivah cast a silent prayer to the goddess before taking them. She stepped onto the pellucid floor, in the very center of the wide blue aisle that lead to the dais and the lovers upon the throne. Carefully she approached, silent, her bare feet not even leaving a heat ring as she took first tentative, then bold steps toward her goal.

Tornak had not seen her cross the space between the column and the center lane, and now the First Priestess' body must block his view of her. Moya's back was to Rivah; the priestess faced the back of the throne and, unless she suddenly

turned or arched back, she would not see Rivah's approach.

The sight of the two lovers rocking and riding turned Rivah's cunt to juice and she crossed the last space breathlessly, a surge of such sensation that she thought she might come on the spot.

On the narrow steps, a hand's reach from the throne, Rivah stepped a little to the side, catching the eye of Tornak. With her finger to her lips and a knowing smile on her face, she enlisted the handsome noble into her conspiracy.

Her gaze rose to the statue of Zenthe that towered over her and she repeated her mantra in her mind again. *Their rules, not yours.*

Tornak's hands held Moya around her waist, lifting the priestess and pulling her down hard onto his cock. Moya's panting gained a degree of whine as her excitement rose. Taking the last step to stand directly behind Moya, Rivah pulled the silken cord that bound her robe and let the filmy dress fall away. Bare, she reached around Moya's back, her right hand slipping down, caressing the round, sweating thigh to part the black curls and wet lips of her cunt, her fingers instantly finding the swollen, sensitive bud, reveling in the hard line of Tornak's cock where it slid in and out. Rivah allowed herself a moment of indulgence and rested her fingers against the slick shaft between strokes, then she turned her full attention

to Moya's clit. Her other hand closed around the priestess' left breast while Tornak, his smile accentuated by his full mustache, followed Rivah's lead and took Moya's other breast into his eager mouth.

Moya's gasp of surprise melted into a moan of bliss as sensitive fingers expertly plucked and massaged the tender bud. Tornak thrust up into Moya, taking control of the rhythm completely while Rivah continued her assault; her bare breasts pressed against the priestess, the sensitive nipples thrilling where Moya's back rubbed roughly against them.

Her fingers were soon coated in Moya's juices as the priestess began an almost violent shuddering. Moya bit her lip and released a throaty, restrained scream as her body convulsed. Tornak was not so discrete, his face twisting into a mask of pleasure as he bellowed into the hall. He pushed his prick as deep as he could into Moya's flowing cunt as he shot his wad, his control relinquished in four hard thrusts.

Rivah chuckled as her fingers relentlessly continued to massage Moya's clit, even as the priestess sagged into Tornak's massive chest. His release complete, Tornak slowed the rhythm to a stop, panting hard, his head falling against the throne's cushioned back. As Moya's shudders turned to shivers, then to nothing more than

sporadic twitches, Rivah circled the priestess' clit once more, satisfied at the groan she elicited, and then withdrew her dripping fingers.

In one languid move, Tornak and Moya were off the throne and sprawled on the pillows that covered the floor beside the dais. Rivah slipped behind the throne, watching the two lovers recover. In moments, Tornak's lids grew heavy and Rivah knew the final gambit was at hand. Taking the silk cover off the throne, Rivah exposed the large wet spot, the rich harvest of Tornak and Moya's rut.

She glanced up at the statue of Zenthe, a slight sting of fear shooting through her stomach as she saw the shroud that hid the goddess' face billow lightly, as though stirred by breath beneath the veil, a sigh of sorrow or desire, a lament or a whispered plea for love. Then the shroud grew still and Rivah wondered if it had truly moved.

Moya moaned as she stretched like a sun-warmed, lazy cat. Rivah held the stained silk in her hand and knelt beside her priestess. She leaned over and pulled Moya's nipple between her lips, her tongue flickering over the tip until Moya sighed and tangled her fingers into Rivah's long red hair, holding her head in place.

Slowly she pulled away from the priestess' grip, a smile playing on her lips as her empty hand began a slow sojourn over Moya's ribs and

belly, until her fingers again plunged through the raven curls and into the slick folds of Moya's cunt. As she stroked the priestess lazily, content to tease, Rivah looked Moya in the face, locking the stormy green gaze of Moya with her own as she held up the stained silken covering, evidence and indictment.

"Now, my priestess, shall we discuss my ordination?"

Chapter 3

Lady Adita, Woman of the Mountain, Zenthe's Voice, High Priestess. For all her exalted titles, responsibilities, and renown, none of the guests or the priestesses who celebrated in the chamber could begin to appreciate her loneliness. Adita considered the High Priestesses who preceded her and, as she had many times over the past few years, she felt the sorrow that drove them to reckless endeavors and tragic ends. Upon her throne, above a sea of bodies, Adita's senses raged with the majestic, frenzied power that crashed against the smooth walls and washed over her where she sat in tortured, singular attendance.

The crescendo of the Rite of Promise was heard in every moan, every cry of bliss, every sigh of building passion, every growl of lustful fulfillment. Men and women, twined and tangled, their bodies bare or adorned in costumes designed to arouse the senses, hands, lips, chests, hips all

moving to a rhythm that pounded like the beat of wild drums. Adita stared, mute, sweat beading on her upper lip, the slick wetness that soaked her pussy darkening the sheer, filmy panels of her dress. She gripped the armrests of her throne, squirmed, her breath rising and falling, matching the passions of the throng around her. Behind her, her two most trusted attendants Nassa and Coroh, maintained the steady, calm pace of their fanning, the woven ribbon and feather paddles failing completely to cool Adita's boiling blood. She looked up at the still, shrouded face of Zenthe. The gossamer blue silk that concealed the goddess' beauty and benevolence rippled slightly with the rising heat and movements of the orgiastic crowd.

Let the veil fall, Great Mistress, Adita pleaded silently, her heart overwhelmed by the sorrow of Zenthe and the pitched agony of their shared frustration. She knew the mysteries, knew the tears and fevered yearnings that never truly disappeared. Zenthe, lifetimes ago, loved greatly, truly, her Consort Lord Abandal, virile lover and truest friend. The goddess bestowed immortality upon him that he may be with her always. Their passion knew no limits and no end and, through the pleasure of their unions, the land of Corsinium blossomed. Zenthe's children took the form of new provinces, as their fertility reached further and further outward, turning the barren lands into

fertile forests, lakes, and plains.

But where Zenthe's joy gave life, her sorrow might destroy the world. Abandal, elevated above all other men to be Consort, reaped the jealousy of the lowly and banal, and, while he was immortal, never aging, sharpened steel pulled across his throat stole Zenthe's love and sent the world to shaking.

The mountain at the world's center exploded, the blood of Zenthe flowing from the wounded earth, scorching the forests and the valleys, the ash of her tears choking all life and covering the plains with a gray sea of sorrow.

Sunlight fled and all things fell still.

The first High Priestess' name was Sharis, a young raven-haired woman, ragged and cold, only a blue scrap of cloth to keep the elements from her skin. She came to Zenthe as she wept, the ash still falling steadily from the sky, the mountain's blood still flowing in terrible, slow spurts. Sharis took the cloth from her shoulders and kneeling beside Zenthe's keening form, she covered her mistress' golden head, kissed her cheek, and whispered, "My goddess, you are not alone in your sorrow. Do not leave us alone in ours." Sharis left Zenthe then, returning down the blackened mountain, bare and shivering.

Zenthe stopped her tears and the ash relented. Sunlight touched the earth again and the gaping

wound of the mountain ceased to bleed. In time, she walked again in the world, but never did she remove the blue shroud. She took lovers, but none ever satisfied her and when one great lord from the far mountains of Parquon came to court her, to woo her, Zenthe felt the stirrings in her heart, an echo of the days when she first came to know Abandal. It would be their first night together, their first union as man and woman. It was time, she decided, time to remove the shroud, time to put an end to sorrow. Then, pausing at the opened door of Parquon's chamber, Zenthe heard a freezing truth. he held no affection for her; he sought only the fame of being the first to bring her to ecstasy after Abandal.

Zenthe's fury gave birth to a curse.

"Take me," she shouted at Parquon, "and if you can enflame me, deliver me into bliss, you will gain more than fame. You will be immortal, but understand this: fail and you will know the ash of my endless sorrow."

Adita turned back to the celebration. She knew the taste of Zenthe's ash. Once, as a priestess, she reveled in the bliss of Zenthe's divine gifts; the sweet song of orgasm had often been hers to sing. But since her election to High Priestess ten years ago, only two men had succeeded in passing the Tests of the Courtier, and twice Adita had again felt the delicious touch of a man's hand, thrilled at

their kisses, felt the heat of their cocks within the folds of her flesh, pulsing, sliding deep into her cunt.

Twice in ten years.

And twice, it was not her cries of orgasmic pleasure that filled her bedchamber. As each lover had withdrawn his cock from inside her, slick with her juices, his breath still quickened, he had understood that Adita remained unfulfilled. She remembered too well the afterglow of lust turned to horror and the harrowing, agonized cries of her lovers as they turned to flame, then cinder, then gray, dusty ash.

She watched the frenzied throng in the room; priestesses and fortunate pilgrims, the elect of her guards and wealthy worshippers whose gold had bought them a place in the orgy, their conjoined bodies moving in beautiful rhythm as the celebration reached a crescendo. She saw mouths sweetly suckling the hard cocks of virile men, tongues busy inciting climax after climax, building to the moment of mass oblivion and divine worship, the sweet, slippery friction of shafts sliding in and out of tight cunts. Cries rang from every corner, from every knot of passion as men and women reached their height of pleasure and came together, hard and long, screaming, sighing, growling. Thick smears of seed slicked the floor in places and the smell of lust filled the chamber,

stronger even than the perfume and incense. Sweat stains darkened the pillows and dampened the brows of the crowd, and, upon the throne, Adita prayed to Zenthe, begged for her release, begged that she free her own soul to the pleasure Zenthe so blessedly gave to the men and women of the world.

Her blood racing, the wetness flowing between her legs, Adita fell slack against her throne, anxious beyond words, excited to near madness, her hand finding her pussy beneath the sheer dress, stroking herself as much as she dared. This was her burden as High Priestess; her frustration was one manifestation of Zenthe's sorrow and anger. Better the priestess' sorrow than the fury of the mountain, which sometimes trembled with the goddess' frustration. Beyond the living memory of grandfathers' grandfathers, the mountain had bled molten fire.

Longer still since Zenthe had been fulfilled and her blessings had flowed unto the world.

Adita looked over her shoulder again at the veiled visage of her goddess. "He is here, dearest Zenthe," she whispered, as much to herself as to the deity. "He is called the Hawk, and they say he will pass the Tests, that he *will* soon lie in my bed." She looked back at the sea of slow, sinuous coupling as passion cooled to sweet communion between lovers. The Hawk was not here, not in

this rite.

He played elsewhere in the temple. For three days, the Hawk would lay with half a dozen select priestesses, together and singly, and if he pleased all of them, with his hands and his mouth and his cock, then he would be chosen, and he would have his chance at immortality.

And Adita would know release, or the gravest despair.

She drew an exhausted breath, her fingers failing either to excite or to comfort the throbbing heat in her pussy. She ached to share the intimate companionship that followed satisfied lovemaking.

"Please, my goddess," she prayed. "Let this Hawk be the one, and, for this age, may we both find an end to torment, may we both live in the fire again. Please..."

Chapter 4

Zenthe looked down on Casmin from behind her veil of blue mist, enormous, beautiful eyes of stone that regarded him with a gaze of purest desire. He worked with a company of a dozen other men, cleaning the chamber where the ceremony had taken place, the inner temple of the goddess.

The room smelled like sandalwood, with a deep, pungent musk underlying the incense, the scent of a hundred couplings or more. Casmin's crew worked with quiet respect for the frenzied acts of passion that had transpired here. Someday, Fesek said, if Casmin were fortunate and diligent, he might attend one of the rites and be permitted to consecrate the goddess with his desire. But tonight, his duty was to clean the chamber and make it fit for Zenthe to look upon in the red light of morning.

So Casmin worked kneeling beneath the stone

figure, cleaning the pallets immediately before the throne of the High Priestess. Another soldier, a sturdy man named Kai Helios, assigned as his partner in the task, hummed softly as he worked. Casmin knew that Kai held some rank among the guard, and as such, his presence on this detail was perplexing.

Kai was shorter than Casmin. His hair was like oak bark and his quick laugh brought a smile to Casmin's lips often during the drudgery. Kai worked with a good spirit, rolling the silken mats and bundling them for the laundry, while Casmin toiled with a wire brush to clean the stones.

Kai paused in his work and watched Casmin. "So, is this what you expected?"

Casmin grinned up at him. "It's my pleasure to serve her," he said, nodding at the goddess. "In whatever way I can."

"Well, of course, but I bet you would give a finger to have been in here, eh? For the rite?"

Casmin considered the question. He could not deny his desire to have been a part of the rite, but he also knew he had to earn the privilege.

On Casmin's first day at the temple, Fesek led him and three other new privates on a tour. They walked all day, winding from building to building, tracing the white walls along flagstone walkways, down into the crater to gaze upon the shining surface of Zenthe's Mirror and back again

up the cinder slopes, Fesek lecturing constantly.

"These are the halls of the maidens," the older man told them, pointing to a winding white cliff of narrow windows. "And any guard touches a maiden's a dead man, though death'll be a long time coming. Truth is, you don't touch any woman here 'less she asks you to, or unless you're chosen for one of the rites. That said, I'm going to warn you that half the time your cock'll ache from staying hard at the sight of the priestesses."

Even with a whole day of walking, Casmin knew he had not seen any great portion of the fortress, for it stretched halfway around the crater, the alabaster stone rising fair against the gray ash of the mountain.

"For now, you'll be here," Fesek told them. "At the main hall till you're trained," and he had shown them the vast chambers of the holiest temple of Zenthe, but not this inner chamber, not the boudoir of Zenthe. Casmin marveled at the tiered marble and fountains, vast enough to hold a legion of lovers, curved petals of stone flowers, shaped to hold a body with her hips upthrust, every surface of the room designed to entice and offer delight.

Kai laughed at the expression on his face as he looked around. "It's a grand place, isn't it? I've been to the minor ceremonies a time or two and it's something to see."

"You've been?" Casmin asked. "Then why are you assigned here now? I thought only privates had this duty."

Kai chuckled. "I'm being punished." He winked at Casmin. "Last week, we had a delicious lord from Maltolos visit the temple, and he chose me over one of the priestesses."

"You?" Casmin tried to hide his confusion as he worked through Kai's confession. In a flash, the older man's meaning dawned and Casmin's cheeks burned with embarrassed blood. He had heard of men who enjoyed the pleasures of other men, but never had he met one — at least to his knowledge.

"You're new, darling," Kai said with a wink. "Pretty soon nothing will shock you."

They worked in silence for awhile, Casmin watching Kai and wondering, Kai grinning from time to time, but mostly paying attention to his work. They progressed around the chamber, moving away from Zenthe and the dais where the high priestess had sat only the night before.

After awhile, Casmin's curiosity would no longer be contained. He paused between mat rolling and fixed a steady gaze on Kai. "Do you favor the love of men over women? It just seems strange that you would even come to the temple."

Kai grinned at him. "Men and women each have their charms, lad, and I'm a man of

considerable appetite." He laid the silk rug he had been rolling aside, and turned to Casmin, "How about you?"

Casmin's cheeks burned again. "I'm not," he began, then corrected himself. "I mean, yes, I have an appetite too, for the love of women, of course."

"Pity." Kai laughed, gazing at Casmin with a mixture of amusement and appraisal. "We could liven up our duty. We'll see, after you've been here awhile. Sometimes the lust will be unbearable and you'll be weary of your hand. Maybe I'll teach you a few tricks no woman knows." Kai's eyes danced with amusement and his grin shone with impish delight as he returned to his work.

They did not speak much after that, the silence comfortable as they worked steadily to completion. The weight of the hours pressed on Casmin's back and the desire to get through his labor fueled his efforts. And yet at the same time, he felt the lingering spell of the room, the magical gaze of the goddess, and the powerful images that floated through his head as he imagined the rite of the night before. Sure as sunrise, Casmin's cock swelled beneath his tunic.

Kai worked some distance away, near another of the two-man teams, and Casmin found himself alone, a whisper of breezes around him, the swirling perfume of the night, mingled with musk and the honey juices of the priestesses. His soul

filled with a sense of reverence.

He turned toward Zenthe, to look upon her, and his heart leapt.

A priestess approached quietly, watching him, only a hand's reach away from him, her white-robed figure superimposed over the statue of the goddess.

Auburn-haired, with bare shoulders like shadowed ivory in the dimly lit chamber, the priestess stood almost as tall as Casmin. Light from a lamp behind her shone through her white robe, casting the shape of her high-breasted, thin-waisted figure, black shadows against pale satin. She breathed in deeply as she regarded Casmin, a trace of a smile on her lips.

"You're new," she said, and then looked at Kai. "Are you his . . . friend?" she asked.

Casmin could only gape at the priestess. He had never seen a woman so lovely, so seemingly ripe for fucking. Every gesture, every movement accented the swell of her breasts, nipples perfectly limned beneath the satin, the flow of her legs and the hard, tight muscles of her stomach.

Candlelight danced in the white film and for a moment, she seemed entirely naked before Casmin, and he barely managed to nod.

"Friend, yes," he said.

The priestess appeared amused as she stepped closer to Casmin. With her slender, pale hand she

reached very deliberately beneath the hem of his golden tunic and touched the cloth that covered his cock, expertly slipped her fingers behind the cotton swathing, and freed him. His breath went ragged in his chest and he panted in short bursts as her cool, impossibly soft fingers, ran the length of the shaft and played in a lazy circle around the head.

"Friends only, I see," she said. "You best hurry with your work, private." She stroked him again, lingering at the base of the shaft, cupping him for just an instant, pumping him slowly as she released, leaving him with an impressive erection projecting from his tunic.

"Yes, priestess," was all he could manage to say.

"Rivah," she said, with a promising look, her gaze fixing on his rock hard penis. "My name is Rivah. Now hurry to finish your labors. The morrow is upon us and, as the goddess says, every morrow brings new pleasure."

She strolled away, her hips swaying provocatively as the curtain of her hair waved in mocking farewell. He watched her with an unblinking gaze for several moments as she inspected the work of the others. Kai dropped a stack of silk pallets onto a larger pile of rolls, the sound shocking Casmin back to the moment. Quickly, he put his cock back in its place glancing

around the room to see if anyone had noticed the interlude. He felt like a man who had just witnessed a miracle.

Like a pilgrim who had seen a vision of his shrine.

* * * *

“Rise and dress yourself, Casmin, dear.”

Kai’s sharp and insistent voice broke the silence of the barracks morning. All the men stirred, but only Casmin, called by name, sat up, curious in spite of the muddled confusion of waking too early.

Casmin had learned that Kai held the rank of captain, and while respected by his men, he often displeased some of the priestesses. Many times the older soldier had been threatened with demotion and worse, but the only punishment ever actually assigned to him by the guard commander amounted to little more than menial duties and a temporary demotion. That Kai’s transgressions appeared perpetual only added to Casmin’s curiosity about the man who now called for him to rise.

A disturbance in the temple had filled the daylight hours, a matter of considerable tension and alarm. The governesses stalked the barracks with stony faces and the officers huddled and

nodded grimly. But if rumors filtered down to the level of private, Casmin did not hear them.

He remembered all too well being a young boy chasing after his big brother, and once again he felt the need to sprint to catch up. Casmin served a different duty each day, still under close supervision by experienced men. The soldiers of Zenthe were more than guards; they were also citizens of the temple, in service to the goddess and to the temple as a community. Guards trained at arms actively protected the temple, patrolling the mountain and the lands within the fortress' shadows. Others provided transport for food grown in the valley and served as smiths and butchers. Some hauled water up from the stream that flowed from Zenthe's Mirror, while others acted as physicians and weavers. The other residents of the sprawling community, the priestesses and a few other worshippers, men and women who had been allowed the privilege of living on the mountain with Zenthe, depended on the guard companies for far more than martial prowess.

When Kai called him, Casmin rose and stood naked beside the bed for a moment, uncertain. "Much as I enjoy inspections, dear, I have no time. You won't need armor, lad," Kai said. "Your tunic's enough. Hurry."

Casmin obeyed, pulling on the golden garment

and lacing his sandals quickly. Kai's urgency spanned the distance between them. Casmin had hardly finished with the second sandal when the captain turned and walked away with rapid steps. Casmin hurried after him. Kai turned just as they emerged from the darkness into pale morning light, his grin relieving Casmin's concerns.

"Fortune grants your duty today, Casmin. Yes, I think you'll suit this task well. Come on!"

Kai led Casmin at a near run, through the narrow walkways that wound among the temple outbuildings. The sun rose like a red flower, opening, turning the alabaster walls of the temple to red clay. The spring air swirled in cool breezes that stirred the pale ash and danced in the curtains of mist and smoke that hung above the mountain.

They entered the courtyard at a run. A broad expanse of paving stones led to a gate, and a pathway down to Zenthe's Mirror, the vast lake that filled much of the cauldron of the mountain. No one else stirred in Casmin's sight and a stab of worry lanced his gut. Surely this was not right, he thought, that no soldiers guarded the gate.

"Where is everyone?" he called to Kai as they closed the distance, the rising sun casting their shadows like giants before them.

"Her command," Kai said, "that all must obey." He had reached the gate and stopped.

"Whose command?" Casmin asked as he

caught up with Kai and saw the figure that awaited them there.

Morning red shone in molten golden waves, hanging long and free down her shining silk-clad shoulders and arms, curling around high, fine breasts scarcely confined behind a satin bodice, and framing a face of perfect beauty half-hidden by a veil of flame.

"Her command, private," Kai said, bowing and still grinning. "Adita, the High Priestess."

In the red light of the opening sun, she was every woman Casmin had ever desired, girls back in the village, a lady stranger passing on horseback, the wind pressing her clothing against her body, Janee and Benessa, the priestess in the inner chamber, Zenthe eternal. Fire lanced a line down his back and gathered in his center, his cock aching hard under his tunic. Adita, the High Priestess, Woman of the Mountain, embodiment of lust and consuming passion.

"Good morning." She smiled at Casmin. He found his words turned to breeze in his mouth, less than fog, gone.

Casmin bowed deeply, the blush of total hopelessness burning his cheeks.

"Buck up, handsome," Kai said and punched his shoulder. "The lady wants a swim in the lake, and we're her guards. Come on!"

Adita, the incarnation of the goddess, turned

from them and strode down the wide path with long steps, her golden robe turning rose, the fine white dust of the mountain rising around her, shining in the rays, as she walked down the path toward the lake, toward the thick curtains of smoke and mist that hung over it, down into the crater, into the shadow.

Casmin walked slightly behind the High Priestess and to her right, while Kai sauntered on the left.

"You know it's going to be cold as Makator's wet spot, Priestess?" Kai called to her, and she laughed, a sound like the ringing of crystal, but warm as glowing coals.

They walked together in silence down the winding, descending road. Casmin breathed the sharp, cool air of the mountain and thought how glad he was to be alive and how blessed to be in the presence of the goddess herself. Though the more he gazed upon her, the less remarkable she seemed, nothing more than a beautiful, desirable woman, golden-haired and easy in her stride, her hips an invitation to paradise, the garment of golden silk like mist around her. Only a beautiful woman, he told himself, even as the goddess' magic stroked his cock, lust almost beyond bearing, for every woman who had ever lived.

Amazed, he looked toward Kai and his friend grinned at him, a knowing smile of complicity.

The magic touched Kai too, in spite of his preference for men. Zenthe's power ruled absolute; the very air rich with her essence. Casmin grew very hard beneath his tunic, his cock swinging long and heavy between his legs.

He ached for Adita as his gaze followed her down the misty path to the lake; Casmin wanted the high priestess, but at that moment, he would have willingly fucked a governess, or any woman who would have him.

The path crested on a bluff above the lake. The shining plain of rippling glass stretched halfway across the crater. It formed in a pocket of fallen stones, a giant's wine cup filled with the dark, cool radiance of morning, suspended beside the endless burning depths of the mountain's heart.

Adita waited on the bluff, letting Kai walk ahead of her, take the first steps down the graveled way to the water, guard against serpents or wicked, lost souls.

Who would harm her? Casmin asked himself and he knew the answer. No one would harm her; they needed no weapons here.

Kai went before Adita to clear her path, to press down sharp stones, and brush aside any branch or thorn that might offend, to insure the passage of the High Priestess of Zenthe was smooth and trouble free.

Casmin remembered the words above the

temple back in Margate, “For her joy is the bounty of the land,” and he understood that his place, as her guard, was to ensure that nothing disturbed her joy.

Adita gazed with intense green eyes, at the lake, standing at the very spot where the water washed a black line in the powdery soil of the crater, the shallows strangely clear even in the dim light, but the depths black and thick as ink. The edge of the sun shone just above the distant eastern rim of the crater and light cascaded across the water.

Adita unfastened her robe and let it fall away. The morning sun’s rays struck her, falling like waves in the yellow silk, dying the perfect roundness of her thighs and bottom, and she turned entirely to gold. Perfect breasts, bronze-tipped in the new light, her hair swirling behind her in the faint breeze within the mountain, Adita arced suddenly in a high, long jump, becoming an arrow, a sleek fish, her slender, bare body striking the water, ivory within the darkness, diving down, along the sloping cone of silt and ash, fading, then gone entirely, hidden by the black depths.

Casmin’s heart began to pound. He looked at Kai for guidance, and Kai said only, “Stay,” but his eyes brimmed with worry.

Casmin swallowed and watched the black

mirror, listening for splashes nearby, where the priestess might emerge from the water, veiled by the mist or hidden by a curve of the shore.

He heard nothing.

"Kai . . ." he began.

"Soon," Kai said. "If she does not return soon. Can you swim?"

He nodded, though the black water looked far from inviting. "I would die for her," Casmin whispered, more to himself than to Kai.

"They fear one day she will not return," Kai frowned, his voice quiet. "Like the High Priestess long ago, who drowned herself here. But this one is stronger. Adita, I think, dares the lake to take her."

Words would not come to Casmin, but Kai knew his thought.

"The High Priestess carries a dreadful weight, Casmin". "Do you know the man they call the Hawk?"

Casmin nodded. "The chosen suitor to the High Priestess."

"You know of the ritual then? If the Hawk pleases her, he will become the immortal consort of the goddess. But, if he fails, he will die and all the land will pay a price for his failure."

"I have heard this," Casmin said, casting a fearful eye on the black lake. What would happen to the land, he wondered, if Adita died here?

"There was an unfortunate . . . incident," Kai removed his tunic to stand naked and poised at the water's edge. "The Hawk unwittingly offended Adita, and she is much troubled as the hour of their coupling approaches. She came here, I hope, to find peace in her heart before the time. Hurry, lad. You must help me seek her in the depths." Kai gathered himself to make the leap.

Casmin did not hesitate. He threw his tunic aside and braced himself for the icy water.

His feet pushed against the ashy bank as he crouched for the jump, but Kai called out, "Wait!"

Light in the depths, a rising ray of gold, pale arms cutting the ink, smoky clouds of mist billowing behind and around her, Adita ascended from the darkness in a jet of ivory, her face breaking the mirror and laughing with glee.

"Kai! I have you this time. I have not made you strip for a year or more, and not just you, but your friend too."

Adita favored Casmin with a long, appraising look, and he felt himself grow very hard again. He blushed, both in his cheeks and in the swollen head of his cock. She emerged from the water, walking up the beach of cinder sand, perfect and golden and gloriously naked. A vision flooded Casmin's gaze, of the three of them twined, fucking there on the beach, the air charged with spring and Zenthe's heat. Nothing seemed more

natural or more perfect, if only they dared.

Her smile bathed Casmin; her laughter redeemed him.

He saw the beads of water caress her skin, her red nipples taut in the chill, her lips parted and moist, the sun risen just above the crater's rim, the golden veil of light upon her turning white and pure, the goddess within her, echoing in her delighted laughter, sweet celebration of life and promise, proof that she had found the peace she had sought before meeting her lover and the hope of fulfillment.

Her joy would be all the bounty of the land.

Chapter 5

Rivah locked her gaze on the dark-clad guards who stood on either side of the massive door that led to the chambers occupied by the courtier, Lord Hakeen D’Laire, the Hawk. The wide marble hall where the courtiers lodged was unlike any of the other halls within the temple, male almost to excess. Here, the décor exuded masculinity, with dark, heavy brocades and silks covering furniture made of rich, dense wood and accented not in the delicate silver scrollwork of Zenthe, but the virile flash of bronze, black iron, and gold. Statuary dominated the alcoves at the ends of the hall and at the center, depicting the heroic legends of the world beyond the temple — Morlis’ victorious sword fight against the Rekdar King, the taming of the Ashun Whale by Lusda the Bold, Fymyr’s stand against the Four Winds. Torches burned bright, their smoky soot darkening the marble walls behind the sconces.

Rivah delighted in the cool marble against her bare feet and the luscious silk she carried in her hands. She smiled, remembering Moya's mute acquiescence to the demand that she be allowed to take the courtier the traditional attire he would wear on the night he would consummate the ritual by fucking Adita, the High Priestess from sunset till sunrise. The Hawk, Lord D'Laire, had already passed the Trial of the Kiss and the Revel of the Priestesses, and, if the glow on First Priestess Moya's face was any indication, the Hawk took the Revel to heart and had pleased the priestess ten ways to Margate and back.

The Revel had ended three days ago. On the morrow, rested and relaxed, the Hawk would take High Priestess Adita to bed. Rivah's smile faded a little. The Hawk might well succeed where others had failed. Successful completion of the ritual demanded that he bring the High Priestess to such bliss that her cries reached the ears of Zenthe herself. If the Hawk succeeded, Zenthe would reward him with immortality and he would sit at the side of Adita until the goddess decreed that they ascend living into paradise, which might be in a year or in a thousand years. She ground her teeth. Adita's pleasure would be the end of opportunity. Rivah's plans demanded action now.

At the threshold of the courtier's door, her pussy moistened as the heat and virile musk of the

guards washed over her. The Hawk's attendants were all strong men, with bullish shoulders and thighs as thick as tree trunks. All shared the dark olive complexion of the desert tribes, all had shining black hair and the uniformly trimmed beards that seemed to be a living badge of their position. Of all the pilgrims and dignitaries who had visited the temple, Rivah had never seen a more magnetic group of men. She had already bedded two of them and while one, a young yeoman her own age, had been an unsophisticated lover, a beautiful, thick cock and a very satisfying endurance blessed their time together. Rivah came twice with him, and the captain she'd bedded just the previous night had fucked her off and on until near dawn, bringing her to orgasm with each joining, their combined juices slicking the bed, the bearskin rug that dominated the floor before the massive stone hearth, and the thick, wooden table that had, prior to their joining, been covered with maps and reports.

"Is Lord D'Laire free to receive a priestess of Zenthe?" Rivah asked, the honored phrase of tradition, the sultry huskiness of her voice all her own. She held the folded dark blue silk tunic up for the guards to see. She smiled, the turn of her lips inviting, her gaze upon their lips direct. The guard to her left smiled, his eyes blazing with lust as he focused on her breasts, the twin peaks

pushing impudently through the sheer material of her dress. Rivah tilted her head at the guard, the tip of her tongue suggestively caressing her upper lip. She loved this. She loved being a priestess, channeling all the power of woman into the arts of seduction and passion. She smiled and watched the bulge in the guard's trousers grow.

To her right, the other man stepped to the massive brass handle of the double doors and pulled one open for her. She looked at him, his soft brown eyes blazing with desire, and Rivah could not resist delivering another invitation. With a wink, she made her desires known. She looked between them, her smile rich with promise.

"May Zenthe bless you." Rivah looked them both over, appraising, marking them. Later, she would find them, and maybe if it pleased Zenthe, she'd feel them both inside her at the same time.

She passed through the threshold, the heavy door shutting quietly. From the rich golden torchlight of the chamber, a man approached, his tunic of silver and gem-encrusted black velvet concealing a tall, thin build. Dark, sparse hair topped his head and, while his jaw was strong, his nose was too big and his lips did not share the fullness of so many of his tribesmen. He bowed to Rivah, stiff and disingenuously.

"Good evening, Priestess. How may I help you?" His voice contradicted his form, a deep

timbre, rich in the accent of the desert.

"I bring Lord d'Laire his attire for the ceremony." She reverently held the tunic before her.

The man reached for it and Rivah stepped back, her eyes widening with feigned concern. "Forgive me, my lord, but this is a gift from the High Priestess to the Courtier. It is for him alone."

"I am Vizan Lorentz, Lord D'Laire's equerry. I will see he gets it." His tone, while deep as a well, dripped fading indulgence as he waved at her to hand him the tunic.

She shook her head. "I am sorry, Lord Lorentz, but only the hand of the Courtier may take this gift from me."

Lorentz huffed a sound that rang somewhere between boredom and frustration. He turned his back on Rivah and walked deeper into the chamber. As he reached the wall that separated the antechamber from the main room of the hall, he turned to Rivah, his eyes rolling in disgust. "Are you coming? This way," he called after her.

She lifted her chin, indignation boiling in her stomach. As she strolled up to the equerry, she understood better the rift between the Hawk and Adita after the Revel. If an equerry had such disdain for the traditions of Zenthe, it made sense that his lord would also show little regard for them.

As Rivah approached the beautiful carved, dark wood screen that separated the main chamber from the antechamber, the delicious sound of men's laughter reached her ears. The equerry veered to the right around the thick screen. Rivah followed, gazing through the intricate, geometric designs of the screen, eager to see what awaited her on the other side.

As she emerged, Rivah paused beside the equerry. She would not give the arrogant bastard the satisfaction of waiting behind him. Seated on a sea of pillows, several men surrounded a low octagonal hardwood table. Jewels, golden coins, pouches of silk and leather, and baubles of ivory littered the center of the table while sets of various multisided dice lay haphazardly in a velvet-lined trench.

Rivah did not hesitate, locking her heated, inviting gaze on the man she knew to be the Hawk. She stepped forward boldly; three of the men, one being the Captain she had slept with only the night before, quickly gained their feet, their hands reaching for the weapons at their sides.

She dipped a respectful bow, her arms extended, the shining silk suspended between her fingers, then rose, lifting her gaze back to the Hawk, boldly staring into his warm brown eyes. "I bring to you, Courtier, a gift from the High

Priestess."

"She practically throws me from her chambers, but she sends a gift?" His deep voice rode along Rivah's spine deliciously. She imagined the sounds he made in passion and imagined his body on hers, his lips hot against her breasts. On cue, her nipples stiffened, pressing through the sheer material of her robe. She sensed the sudden change in the room as all the men raked her with their gazes, and, much to Rivah's joy, the Hawk's was the hottest of all.

"It is Adita's desire that you wear this tunic, a tunic worked by her own hand, when you shall meet her tomorrow night, my lord." Rivah started to speak, but purposefully hesitated, closing her mouth, turning her lips into a demure smile. She cast a coy glance at a few of the men, and then looked back at the Hawk.

Silence filled the chamber for several moments before the Hawk rose to his feet. With a wave of his arm, he ordered his men, "Leave us."

The booty of the gaming table never received a second glance as the men filed out, the captain waiting at the edge of the screen until the Hawk gave a curt nod, sending him away.

Still as stone, the equerry held his place beside Rivah. Eyes downcast, she turned to him with suspicion. The equerry returned her gaze, smug and condescending.

"My lord," the deep well of Lorentz's voice managed an unflattering whine. "I did not want to disturb you, but she insisted." Rivah's gaze bored icy holes into the thin man, but with a blink and a turn of her head, she turned to meet the lustful gaze of the Hawk with half-lidded eyes, burning with all the lust in her soul. Tilting her head toward the door, Rivah made her silent plea and promise.

"Thank you, Lorentz. Leave us now."

"But, my lord —"

"That will be all. You may seek your quarters." The Hawk's gaze never stopped roaming over Rivah's body.

With the slightest huff, the equerry bowed respectfully to the Hawk, "As you wish, my lord." He backed to the screen, then turned and stalked away. She waited until she heard the quiet echo of the door shutting before a smile graced her face.

"Thank you, my lord. This is an intimate tradition, best suited for two."

The Hawk's grin, accented by the trim beard and mustache, somehow managed to make him even more handsome. "Two, is it? Then maybe the High Priestess should have brought the tunic herself."

Rivah approached, her hips swinging invitingly from side to side, her arms still held perfectly perpendicular to her body, the tunic between

them. "My lord, I asked for this honor because I have hopes of helping...bridge the distance between you and my lady Adita."

The Hawk watched her, his arms crossed casually across his wide chest. "Bridge?"

"Aye, my lord. I think I understand you and your kin. You are from the desert's edge, where life can be difficult, where strength is the only way to survive. There is little that celebrates such softness as is found within the walls of this temple."

The Hawk settled on the pillows, leaning back, his thick thighs accented by the tailored cut of his trousers, the bulge at his crotch admirable. "You are right, Priestess. My people live and die by the sword."

Rivah approached until she stood very near him, then slowly sank onto the pillows at his side. "Aye, my lord, and our High Priestess Adita, she is of a more conservative faith. She holds firm to the ancient tradition that says no blades may be worn within the Chamber of Zenthe." Rivah looked down for a moment, then met his gaze again, hesitant. "She was wrong, my lord, to demand that you leave her."

Rivah slowly outstretched her arms, offering the tunic, her gaze roaming over him, locking on his hips and crotch. She quickly looked back up at his face. "I offer to you, Courtier, the tunic of High

Priestess." The Hawk hesitated for a moment, then took the garment in his hand. In a blink, he tossed it onto the gaming table and grabbed Rivah's arms, pulling her down onto the pillows, rolling on top of her. His mouth descended, his lips expertly parting hers, his tongue invading her mouth, spicy and hot. She closed her arms around him and pressed herself tight. Her tongue tangled with his in a kiss of pure lust.

She groaned appreciatively, her fingers quickly finding his bare back under his satin tunic, thrilling at the sensation of the smooth skin stretched over supple, hard muscles. The bulge in the Hawk's trousers now pressed hard and long against her thighs, promising, and Rivah's pussy flowed in anticipation. She slipped her hand into the trousers, her fingers splaying over the warm flesh of his buttocks. She squirmed to free her legs from beneath him, scissoring him, his full weight wonderfully heavy against her stomach as one of his hands cupped a breast and tweaked the nipple to full peak. Rivah arched against the Hawk, lost in the delicious, wild kiss, hungry and promising. She wrapped her legs around him, opening herself completely to him, ready to tear the trousers from his body and take the impressive, teasing cock into her slippery cunt.

A feral growl emanated from him as he pulled back suddenly. The rush of air shocked Rivah, as if

cold water had been splashed on her skin, her gasp genuine in its regret.

"By Veyjol's prick, who are you, priestess? What are you doing here?" He gripped her arms tightly and squeezed them hard. His gaze scorched her, a dangerous mix of lust and suspicion. She swallowed, a tickle of fear feathering her belly and saw in his stormy brown eyes a recipe for rape, quick and final, and she knew she must proceed carefully.

She relaxed, pliant in his arms, her gaze meeting his as she willed herself to calmness.

"I am Rivah, my sweet Hawk, Priestess of Zenthe. I fear not the wrath of my goddess or my lady. After what happened between you and Adita, I," She hesitated letting the silence feed the moment as her hands found his face and lovingly cupped it. "There is passion here, dear Hawk, and many, like myself, who anxiously await your rule to begin." She turned her head, her hands slipping to his chest and closed her eyes dramatically, her voice falling to a whisper. "You will be immortal by moonrise tomorrow, a god in your own right." She lifted her left leg, positioning her warm, wet pussy to cradle his hard cock, the material of his trousers a burden she could not wait to eliminate. She looked again into his eyes, tears glistening in her lashes.

"Please, my lord, bless me."

His mouth descended on hers, his tongue invading her mouth with an assault that sent her sense reeling. His hand that had once fondled her breast now tore the sheer material away from her body. A victorious laugh swelled in her chest, but she stifled it, channeling the sound into a sultry cry of joy, adding more fuel to the raging fire between them. She tore at the seam of his trousers and freed his beautiful cock to throb and pulse under her fingertips.

The Hawk rose and quickly shed his tunic and trousers before pulling the shreds of her dress from her body, leaving her entirely bare and pliant beneath him. His gaze devoured her as he descended, mouth closing on her left nipple, suckling her breast expertly, his tongue flicking the hard peak, sending ripples of pleasure to her center. His hand slid down her stomach until his fingers found the slick valley of her sex and she writhed against his fingers wanton in her desire to feel them plunge deep into her.

The Hawk's fingers slipped into the folds of her pussy. Coated with her juices, they traced teasing circles around her clit. His throaty laugh sent sweet vibrations through the nipple in his mouth. He pulled away and looked at her, his lips turned upward into a dominant smile of conquest. "You are a juicy one. What is it you want, Priestess?" he crowed, two fingers plunging into the wet heat of

her cunt, pumping deeply and precisely until she bit her lower lip.. "This, or," the Hawk pulled his fingers out of her, much to Rivah's displeasure, but then it was the thick swollen head of his impressive cock that bathed in the soaked folds of her sex, circling her clit, promising.

"Yes, my lord, yes!" Rivah thrust her hips against his cock, the head barely entering her, the sensation electric and thrilling.

"As you wish, wench." But instead of sinking into her, he pulled away, his ass resting on his ankles, his long, thick cock like a tree growing into the sky. "You wish me to bless you?" The Hawk's gaze incinerated her. "First, you must worship me." She sat up and stared at the massive cock, the head reaching beyond the Hawk's navel, the thick base easily as big around as her wrist. She was not shy, nor was she unskilled with her mouth, and while she had never sucked such a massive cock, she welcomed the challenge. Rivah's lips twitched into a grin of appreciation.

"Aye, my lord. My faith is undaunted." She crawled up to him, sliding between his thighs, her hands kneading the thick muscles there. She descended, bypassing the reddened head, her cheek caressing the veined shaft until her nose was buried in the carpet of thick, black curls. Turning her head, she parted her lips, kissing the hard ridge of flesh at the very base as her fingers

slipped beneath to cup his heavy balls. Rivah inhaled, savoring the overpowering masculine musk of the Hawk, letting the scent inspire her.

Her lips suckled the ridge, but it was her tongue that began the praise. Flickering, feather soft, quick, Rivah ascended slowly, her mouth busy, her hand gently massaging his balls. As she reached the head, Rivah's tongue became more insistent as she circled the thick ridge, flickering underneath it, swathing him, almost whipping him with the moist lash of her tongue. At the very tip of his cock, Rivah paused in her service and savored the Hawk's low growl. She pressed her lips to the head again, parting them slightly, then in one torturous, slow, tight descent, she devoured his pulsing length, all of him, opening her throat to take the thick, long shaft completely past her lips. She groaned in delight as again her nose was buried in the curls from which the Hawk's prick sprang joyously.

He let out a bestial cry, his hand tangling in her hair as he arched even further into her mouth. Rivah slowly ascended, pulling away completely, her tongue first cradling, then ravishing his cock as she exposed it again to the air. Her hand continued to stroke his balls, concentrating on the sensitive skin at the base. Over and over she repeated her descent and ascent, slowly increasing her rhythm as her mouth and throat learned the

contours. His breathing increased, his hand on her head clutching, his hips thrusting him into her mouth. Pre come flavored her efforts, adding a delicious satin texture to the wetness of her mouth. She could feel him reaching his climax, knew that he'd soon fill her throat with his hot seed. So, as she ascended for what she certainly thought would be the last time, instead of plunging down again, she sat up, her lips slippery with the mixture of her saliva and his pre come.

She smiled at him, her fingers sliding away from his balls. Her sopping cunt ached for attention and she had every intention of satisfying it. "Am I worthy of your blessing, my lord?"

The Hawk, his cock glistening and throbbing, laughed heartily. "Aye, girl, you most certainly are!" He leaned forward and grabbed her by the waist, lifting her to him, his lips and teeth locking on her right nipple, his fingers invading her pussy again, working her clit until Rivah whimpered. His cock pulsed between her belly and his, the heat and wetness of it torturing her, teasing her further. She wanted his cock inside her, not beating against her ribs.

As if reading her thoughts, the Hawk released her breast and grinned at Rivah, his eyes brimming with unbridled lust. He took to his knees and turned, holding Rivah in his arms. In a fluid move, he turned her away from him, and

bent her over the low gaming table. She carefully moved the tunic aside before her hands splayed out over the coins and jewels of the forgotten pot. The Hawk brazenly forced her legs apart, the heat of his body almost burning the sensitive flesh of her cunt. She groaned in delight. She loved being taken from behind, loved the unique sensation of a hard cock pounding into her at that angle. Before she could reflect further on her delight, she felt the thick head of the Hawk's prick pressing her. With a single long, perfect thrust, the thick shaft filled her completely. She cried out, the bolt of sensation that pierced her core bringing her close to orgasm. The Hawk waited there, his hands on her waist, pulling her back against him, pushing every delicious inch deep into her pussy.

"Yes!" Rivah groaned, almost lost in the wonderful penetration.

The Hawk set a rhythm that set her blood boiling in moments. With quick, thorough thrusts, he fucked her harder, pushing deep until she thought he'd split her. She moved against him, even, her flesh closing around him until the tide of her own orgasm no longer could be ignored. He filled her completely, every thrust ending in exciting totality. The thick head of his cock exploited the most sensitive flesh of her pussy and pushed it continuously, ratcheting up Rivah's senses. She squirmed on the table, coins sticking to

her sweat-sheened skin, jewels embedding into her breasts, chains of gold and gems tangling in her clutched hands. The Hawk's rhythm grew faster, his thrusts deeper still, his balls slapping her clit with each thrust, sending further shocks of pleasure through her.

The tide breached the dam as he pumped four long, quick thrusts, jarring in their force. Rivah screamed as she exploded, waves of pleasure crashing over her sex, filling her being only to be dammed by her extremities and sent back to her core again and again. The Hawk's cry filled the chamber as he erupted deep inside her, his hot come filling her pussy in thick spurts. Cries became groans that became panting sighs as his weight pressed her into the table, their shared exertion matched in perfect rhythm as their sweat mingled, her long red hair creating a lace against his neck and chest.

She squirmed against him, his softening cock still held tight inside her. "My lord," she purred, the smile on her lips genuine, "Thank you."

The Hawk chuckled and kissed the back of her neck. "You, girl, are welcome." He pulled out of her with a low growl and she felt as if she might sink into the floor without the pinning of his cock inside her. She sighed, turning over, slipping to the pillows, her back against the table. She grinned and admired his well-muscled body, the now

flaccid cock, glistening with their mixed juices, still impressive by all standards.

She rose, seductive, her gaze blazing over him. "Would my lord care for some wine?"

The Hawk smiled at her. "Aye, a glass of wine, then we must part."

Rivah nodded. "Of course, my lord. You must be rested for tomorrow." She casually picked the tunic up, carrying it away from the gaming table, placing it on the long counter that dominated the far end of the room.

And from beneath the folds of the silk, she removed the small vial hidden in one of the sleeves. Palming it, she went to the stand where an ornate gold and jewel-encrusted carafe sat surrounded by matching goblets. Her back to the Hawk, Rivah emptied the vial into two goblets, then poured them full of dark red wine. The potion would stir him to life again in only a few minutes. She shivered in delight. With the potion, the Hawk could fuck her, come, and be ready to go again in mere moments. She'd fuck him for many more hours and love every minute of it. From just the first coupling, Rivah had no doubt the Hawk might well fulfill the challenge of the Courtier and become the next Consort.

She hid the empty vial in the carafe and picked up the goblets. As she turned, she looked at the lounging Hawk, a moment of regret brushing her

heart. He was beautiful and virile, an amazing lover, but those qualities would not save him.

Rivah would exhaust him before he ever touched the High Priestess.

She walked slowly toward him, her nipples hardening with each step, resolve and lust giving her seduction added power. She would savor the next several hours, fuck him and be fucked by him, pleasing him in every way she knew how.

It was the least she could do for a condemned man.

Chapter 6

*J*ust before the striking of the hour and the beginning of the Great Rite, all the world turned purple, the light of the fading sun cast in a long moment against the mantle of advancing darkness, the mountain's shadows radiant with a hue like a woman's swollen nipple. Casmin, on duty in the entry hall of the temple, watched the sunset through a diamond window and dreamed about Adita.

He and Kai had stayed with the High Priestess until she exhausted herself swimming and then they made a sling of their arms and carried her back, naked and wet, all of them laughing, Casmin's senses overwhelmed with her heat and her scent. He remembered the press of her butt against his hand, skin like fire, his hand curled under her thigh, lifting her, a finger's stroke away from the folds of her sex. She had shifted more than once, settling on the hands that held her

sweet bottom, so the heat of her cunt touched his fingertips, moist and vivid as a bite.

Now, remembering her, on guard duty in the plum light of evening, Casmin hung brick hard, filled with a lust that knew no direction, no focus, only a need more vital than hunger. His cock chafed where it rubbed against the folds of his golden tunic.

If he did not fuck something, someone, he might go mad.

Yet his post on this momentous night was a lonely one, not even Kai to mock him. Most of the guards had been called to special duty this eve, to the priestesses and to the esteemed ladies who had come to the temple for the Rite.

But he had only watched the ladies of the land arrive all day, many veiled against gossip's eyes, making their pilgrimage to the temple from Margate, from Daughter's Glen and Skinneton, from villages and towns at the edge of the desert, from mighty Damtown on the River Bliss and from crossroads that did not yet have names. Matrons, cloaked in heavy silks, and virgins, almost naked, eager for the goddess' blessing, gathered at the temple to celebrate the Rite. Two hundred women, each chosen by Zenthe, called to the mountain to share the goddess' night. Two hundred ready wives, sisters and daughters, lusty as minks, bound by the twilight and the pulse of

Zenthe's desire.

The goddess' heartbeat echoed in hundreds of drums, deep and steady, beaten in the crater, at the shores of the Mirror and the edge of the smoking abyss, so the very alabaster stone of the temple throbbed with their muted thunder.

The air smelled like musk and perfume, Zenthe's sweat.

The seasoned guards had all been called to serve the ladies and the priestesses, to please them with hand, tongue, and cock, to bring each of them to blinding climax again and again, to worship them as the goddess would be worshipped, with pleasure unbounded, in the pure heat of ecstasy.

"How sweet to be a soldier in Zenthe's service true," Casmin sang the first line of an old song softly, and knew his turn would come. Why, just yesterday, he had held the bare ass of the High Priestess in his hand. He remembered Adita again, and ached for wanting her.

And now Adita lay with the Hawk and soon the world might be reborn.

Casmin envied the Hawk, and hated him a little too. The preening warrior had appeared beside Adita only an hour before, the pale afternoon light shining on the steel of his buckles and turning the lustrous black satin of his tunic to obsidian. The two had paraded back and forth on the parapet of the temple in that time when the sun shone still

golden, before the veil of twilight fell, and the currents of lust that flowed round them like tempest winds blew across the assembled multitude, Zenthe's fevered breath; until every man and woman upon the mountain burned with unquenched desire, hard and wet by their sex's dictate, aching for sunset and the rising fury of the drums.

Casmin paced the empty chamber in a back hallway of the temple, his only charge to keep away the curious or the uninvited lustful who might seek to fuck closer to the holy couple that their own pleasure might be increased.

The moment of sunset passed like a wink, the deepening eve turning to slate, then ebony, the drums down in the immense crater roaring and echoing, pounding at the thick stone walls.

The pulse of life itself beat in the air and in Casmin, and mesmerized by the moment, he began to stroke his cock.

The outer door, richly inlaid with golden sheets, swung open, silent, and the pounding of the drums deafened him before it closed again.

A priestess stood framed against the light, the lamplight in the room behind her dancing in the smoky gauze of her robe. Casmin knew her: Rivah, whom he had met on his first night of his temple duty, when he and Kai worked to clean the goddess' hall.

She stood just within the door, washed in muted thunder. Then, hardly regarding him, she crossed the chamber with quick strides, her long, tapered legs tawny and smooth beneath the swirling robe, its gossamer fabric concealing nothing of her ivory perfection. Her chestnut hair spilled over the misted curves of her breasts, red tipped and hard with the night's magic, and her lips parted in a moist pulse, panting, whispering prayers, her eyes heavy-lidded, but all her purpose on the door that opened to a hall that lead, in time, to the temple's innermost chamber.

"Wait," Casmin said, "You cannot go in there," and he stepped to block her path.

Rivah paused and swayed a moment, as though she might be drunk. "All right." Her eyes opened wide, her ice-blue gaze pinning him. "This is near enough." She turned away from him for a moment in the direction of the inner temple. "I will know."

He felt the drums inside his cock and he realized he still held it in his hand, and that his tunic had been pushed aside to free his erection.

Rivah followed his gaze with hers. She smiled when she saw what he had and she did not hesitate.

Fingertips like the kiss of silk, her hand stroked the shaft with accurate abandon, teasing the ridge and rubbing the bead in a smooth circle.

He growled and took her arms. The heat of her

body was a summons he could not refuse, the whisper of her gossamer robe a call to his soul and to all the lust Zenthe had kindled in him. He felt no tenderness, none of the sweet sensations that had marked his time with Benessa and Janee. He wanted to crush Rivah beneath him, wanted to thrust his cock into her as hard and deep as he could, until she screamed, he wanted to bite her hard enough to bruise, and he knew she wanted these things too.

With teeth bared, Rivah tore his tunic aside and pulled him to her, her hand guiding his cock. She climbed him, her sandaled foot finding brief purchase on his leg, then his butt as her leg wrapped him, her robe rising around her waist, pulling him to the wall, bracing herself against a table, half sitting on it, her coppery thatch a beacon above the open slit of her cunt.

She stroked the doorway and opened it for him, her other hand under his cock, lifting and guiding.

Then he was in her, with no ceremony, no skill at all, a hard shaft of flesh ruthless as a sword, burying itself in a sheath of slippery fire. Wet heat and a shot of pleasure almost unbearable in its intensity raced to his core and gathered in the muscles of his back.

He tore the robe from her, so that his hands might find what they wanted, nothing less than every inch of her radiant, perfect flesh. He gripped

her hips hard, pulling her against him, burying his cock even deeper, feeling the sharp thrust of her torso, the arch of her back when she ground against him.

One thrust, two, the drums kept the rhythm, then they were in a place where the only rhythm was their own, as savage and hard as the mating of panthers.

Her fingernails furrowed lines in his back and his buttocks tensed hard as he thrust deeper still, the table cracking with the force he brought against her.

She screamed and tore at him, riding him as much as he impaled her, their flesh one in that moment of pleasure so intense he lost vision as his spirit rocketed toward the stars.

Rivah pulled him back with the sweetest gravity.

She pushed against him, the wet grip of her cunt slipping along his cock, rolling muscles that milked him as she moved back and forth, independent of his movement now, so that each of them fucked the other in counter rhythm, finding complexity in the primitive pounding of the drumbeat, two hearts, two pulses, building together.

He gave in to her pushing and, still deep inside her, let her ease him back, settling on his haunches as she lowered herself with him, sliding up and

down, in and out, every touch like fire run wild in a forest. His butt touched the cold stone of the floor and he moved his grip from her hips to her shoulders as she settled on him, relentless as the sensation between them began to peak.

When his legs stretched before him, she settled into place, fully impaled on his swollen cock, her eyes closed, her lips parting, teeth clenched. Zenthe anointed them with sweat and musk as she raised herself almost clear of his shaft, then lowered again, crushing him with the velvet muscles of her pussy, pulling his ecstasy into her, as she began to gasp and grind.

He bucked hard, trying to penetrate even deeper into the vale of fire, his hands on her breasts, twisting her stiffened nipples, hungry as a starving man, his hands like starving mouths, his cock an appetite unto itself. The floor fell away beneath him, everything gone except the drums and the fiery priestess, her gasps turning to short screams as she ground down on him.

The moment rose pounding, faster and louder, and then he came, an endless eruption of obliterating sensation, as her little cries became one scream, wild as a madwoman, her cunt gripping him harder, amplifying the sensation as he emptied himself into her.

Slowly his senses returned to something near normal. He felt the cold stone of the floor under

his butt, the edge of a rug under his shoulders, saw the dancing lamplight on the arched ceiling through the veil of Rivah's red hair as she lay atop him. Casmin held her tight, his cock still in her velvet vice, her thighs moving like bands of smooth steel against his, her foot caressing his calf in slow strokes.

Rivah ground against him once more, awakening new life in his cock, and her hands traced his sides and hips. She propped herself up on her hands and looked down at him, her breasts hanging above his chest, then she lowered herself, crushing those perfect orbs against him, kissing him long and deep, her tongue slow and probing in his mouth.

When the kiss ended, she laid her head on his chest, the chestnut tendrils binding him to her. She continued to stroke his hip, her fingers finding places that already stirred him to new interest, so that his cock pulsed inside her. Breathless, almost beyond speech, he whispered in her ear, "For the goddess."

She pulled slightly away from him and her blue eyes danced with smoky mischief.

"Oh no, my sweet soldier." Rivah licked at a drop of sweat on his chest. "That was not for Zenthe. That was for me."

Chapter 7

Adita watched the door to her private chamber close, the image of Nassa's face burning before her eyes even as the monstrous portal swung shut, separating them. The teasing twinkle in Nassa's mellow, golden eyes could not conceal her concern and her hope.

Beyond the walls of Adita's chamber, in the courtyards and gardens of the temple, along the ridgeline of the crater and all around the mountain, flutes, strings, and chimes combined beneath the thunderous pounding of a thousand drums, melody for the unmistakable songs of ecstasy that would fill the night with prayers born of Zenthe's passion. Adita remembered fondly her first Great Rite, when she was but a novice priestess. It was one of the most endearing mysteries of Zenthe that, even in her despair and sorrow, the goddess never begrudged the joy of the faithful. Adita had spent that first Great Rite in a small pool with two randy Ocran envoys, sent

by the Sea King to bring the woman who was High Priestess rare gifts from the depths. The envoys, three months at sea, were more than ready to soothe their blue balls and Adita had obliged them with enthusiasm. All night, to the same beat of the drums she felt pounding with her pulse now, the three of them fucked until exhausted, then they curled together on pillows that surrounded the wading pool, and slept soundly until the temple began to shake.

That rite had been a failure, but Zenthe's sorrow had been mitigated and the aftermath had not been dire, though the High Priestess' disappointment and sense of failure led to the despair that eventually drove her into exile, when Adita ascended to the terrible rank.

How she understood that despair now!

She turned and looked at the Hawk. He stared out the balcony doors, his back to her, posture relaxed yet alert, arms spanning the wide entryway, his hands seemingly pushing the frame away from him. The Hawk might well be the one to free Adita from the burden of her blessing, to fill her with the ecstasy of Zenthe, the great rapture that only lovers could share. Yet, what kind of Consort would the Hawk be? His strength and leadership would serve well in the temple, but what of his arrogance, his disregard for tradition and for her feelings concerning those

traditions? He'd brought a blade into the chamber of Zenthe, an affront to the goddess herself. Other High Priestesses might have ignored the infraction, but Adita could not. The decorative scabbard winked and flashed, the black leather encrusted with jewels and trimmed in gold, the hilt a masterpiece of craftsmanship.

But no matter how beautiful, no matter how sacred, no blade should be worn before Zenthe, to stir the memory of love's death and ecstasy lost.

The Hawk had been advised to leave the sword behind, advice he chose to ignore. Adita, shocked and shaken by his casual dismissal of her demand that he remove the sword, had quickly banished the Courtier and his followers with barely a pleasantry. As Adita retreated behind the dais, Nassa and Coroh racing to keep pace with her, she looked up at the shrouded face of Zenthe, tears quickly flooding her vision. Overwhelming, aching sorrow filled her soul and drowned the chaos of the Hawk's retinue retreating in confusion from the chamber.

In the days since then, Adita reined her emotions and focused on her duty, not only to Zenthe but to Corsinium as well. Generations had passed since Zenthe had last known the white fire of orgasm, since the land had burned with her joy and her life-giving gifts. The Rites had fallen short of disaster — the goddess was unsatisfied but not

angry — there had been no plague, no pestilence. The land bloomed well enough; harvests fed the masses, but the desert stretched longer fingers every year into the green bounty of the valleys and plains. There had been a dozen High Priestesses since the last time Zenthe had known ecstasy, some of them dead by their own hand, others allowed to step down from the lonely dais, re-enter the flow of mortality's river, grow old and fade to dust.

Adita's predecessor had retired after a particularly unsatisfying Rite, when the mountain had trembled with the goddess' disappointment and the River Bliss had almost dried in the spring. Since then, since Adita's ascendance, there had been green seasons and sere ones, and the whole world appealed to her for renewal.

Zenthe looked down with hope.

If this rite failed, Zenthe's sorrow might be unbearable.

Adita stood silently, committed to her path, to her role as Zenthe's flesh, and watched the man who would be her consort. He was handsome, she admitted. He'd nearly taken her breath away when she first saw him, before the offending weapon prematurely ended their meeting. His thick black hair and beard enhanced his strong jaw and the curve of his brows set off incredible, penetrating eyes, black as a bird's. He was tall,

almost a full head taller than she, and while she'd not yet seen his body bare, there was no denying his clothing advertised the package beneath quite admirably.

"My lord," Adita said, as she approached a small table. She carried with easy grace two goblets and a carafe of wine. "I would offer you wine from our vineyards, the grapes picked and blended for the lips of the Courtier and High Priestess alone."

He turned to her, his gaze warming her from head to toe. He slowly shook his head, his smile controlled, as he approached. "I think I will pass, my lady. I do not wish anything to cloud this night."

She hesitated then nodded, smiling. "My lord, I wish to explain to you —"

"There is no need to explain. Let us just put it behind us." The Hawk stood very near her, his heat burning through the sheer material of her dress, his smile unapologetic, bordering on insolent. He reached out, his strong hands stroking her arms gently. He gazed into her eyes, his dark lashes framing lustful pools of black. She smiled up at him. There was no fear reflected in his eyes, only bold strength and confidence — too much confidence perhaps, but for her, this man's cockiness was far more comforting than the shadow of failure that had met her twice before.

She reached up and stroked his cheek. "You are my Courtier. You come to me gifted in the arts of love having proven your worth in the Revels," Adita's other hand went to his face, cupping it lightly, her touch tentative, reverent. "Please me this night, my Courtier, show me your passion, gift me with ecstasy so long denied me, and so you shall be rewarded with eternal life, never to age or suffer the ravages of illness. Please me, and be known as Zenthe's Consort." Adita recited the ancient oath of the Great Rite, her voice just above a whisper. She struggled to suppress her fears even as they twined inseparably with hope and waking anticipation.

His arms slipped around her waist, but she took a step back, her gaze locked with his. "But know this, Courtier. If our passion is not shared, if I am left longing, you will forfeit more than reputation. You will forfeit your very life." She took another step back, putting space between her and the Courtier, giving him the ease of disengagement.

"Take me," she echoed the words of Zenthe, "and if you can enflame me, deliver me into bliss, you will gain more than fame. You will be immortal, but understand this: fail and you will know the ash of my endless sorrow."

The smile had faded from the Hawk's face, but the lustful fire within his eyes never wavered.

Boldly he closed the space between them, pulling her to him forcefully, his hard body searing her skin.

“By the rising sun, you will know ecstasy again, my lady. This I promise you.”

She relaxed, her body responding to the hardness of his form beneath the tunic she’d stitched with her own hands. He was hard in all the right places, including his thickened cock. Adita closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. He smelled good, a subtle musk of masculinity. He would make a good Consort, she repeated to herself.

And she was ready.

Zenthe would fill her soul again; Adita would know the goddess’ gifts again. This man who held her now had impressed the priestesses of the Revels, had put a smile on the First Priestess’ face that still radiated days after their interlude. Now, after ten years, Adita knew she’d feel again the exquisite oblivion that arose only from the union of two bodies, two heartbeats, two souls. Her own fingers and the toys of the temple had brought her to climax often enough, but those solitary pleasures could never begin to compare to the bliss of orgasm given by a mate.

The Hawk smiled at her, his full lips parting slightly as he descended, his mouth pressing to hers, his tongue teasing. Sparks flared to flame in

her soul as her arms tightened around him. She pressed her body against his, melting into the contours of his chest and groin, her belly blanketing the rising length of his cock. A soft groan escaped her throat as her pussy slicked, eager to accept the Hawk's hard gift.

He pulled away slightly, his hand sliding beneath the sheer front panel of Adita's gown. Expert fingers found the cleft of her pussy, his fingertips barely brushing through the damp curls. He took his hand away, stole the heat and a cry of dismay grew in Adita's stomach. He brought his glistening fingers to his lips, his tongue slowly stroking the tips. He smiled, triumphant.

"Sweet," he grinned, as black lust razed her soul. "And ready."

He picked her up, cradling her in his arms, his mouth descending on hers in a feverish kiss that further stirred her blood. She wanted him; she wanted him deep inside her, fucking her until she screamed, fucking her every way a woman could be fucked.

He carried her to the large bed that dominated the chamber. Covered in silks and velvets of varying shades of gold and pillows of every shape and size, the high bed beckoned.

This would be the time, she told herself. Now is the hour of my goddess' joy.

The Hawk's kiss burned Adita's lips, her tongue twined with his, eager to bind their bodies in every way. He lowered her onto the bed carefully, his weight still on his feet as he continued the devastating kiss. Her hands roamed over him; under his tunic, fingertips tingling at the luxury of his body, satin skin over marble muscle.

His hands explored too. He cupped her breasts, his thumbs teasing the nipples through the sheer material until they were hard pinions cresting her chest. Tiny ripples of exquisite sensation flooded her sense with each tweak, each stroke.

He pulled away, breaking the spell long enough to cast his tunic off and remove his leggings and boots. In moments, he stood before her bare in the golden light. Breath would not fill her lungs. She stared openly, entranced by the virile, strong man before her. He was not young, but he was all man with the gifts of time's tempering to shape his body, a perfect balance of strength and conditioning. His dark hair and eyes accented the deep clefts and plains of his muscled shoulders, arms and chest. She looked down, a small gasp escaping her as she stared openly at his cock stretching skyward past his navel, long and thick, deeply veined and pulsing in anticipation. She felt her smile stretch across her face.

The Hawk chuckled as his hand reached down and stroked his shaft slowly. "My gift to you, my

lady."

She laughed. "And a handsome gift it is, my lord."

He closed the gap between them, standing over her as she stretched across the bed, her sheer gown askew, her body bare from her belly down, her right nipple peeking from the edge of her dress.

He reached out with one hand, a single finger burning a line from Adita's throat, down between her breasts, to the gathered folds of her dress at her waist, his gaze locked with hers. Before she could blink, his fingers curled into the material and ripped. The sheer gown shredded with little resistance, the sound of its tearing like the crackle of a flame.

Now he gazed at her. Upon the bed, the tattered remains of her dress beneath her, she laid prone, ready for him, eager. She felt her juices moisten the tips of the blonde curls between her legs and she felt her breasts, swollen, the nipples hard and inviting. His eyes darkened; he shook his head and drew a deep breath, his gaze fixed on her crotch. "You are a goddess, my lady."

His gaze met hers, triumphant. "My goddess."

He joined her on the bed, pulling her to him, his lips burning a trail of kisses over her skin from throat to shoulder until finally his lips closed around her right nipple. She let out a small cry as

his tongue flickered and danced over the tip and her hands devoured his back and neck and shoulders, the thick mane of clean hair that fell around him like a cowl. She savored his touch and the sensation of his mouth upon her. Too soon, he moved from her right breast to her left, bringing that one quickly to peak as well.

The desert lord moved down her body, biting and kissing, one hand repeatedly stroking down to the curls, teasing the edges of her sex until Adita thought she'd go insane with want. The void of her cunt desperately wanted filling by him, but again and again, he teased, his fingers staying clear.

She groaned and the Hawk laughed. "Patience, my lady."

His chin brushed the blonde curls of her sex and she stilled. Soon, his breath, warm and promising tickled the slick lips. Adita saw the Hawk grinning as he slid two fingers into the petals, pulling them slowly open. Her head fell back on the pillows, anticipation weighing her into the cushions.

No subtlety, no flowery seduction, his mouth took her pussy by storm. His body had forced her legs apart and now one hand pushed at her thigh, parting her, exposing the folds of her dripping sex. Ravenous as a lion, he covered her cunt with his mouth, his tongue mercilessly circling her clit and

razing every fold. Waves of pleasure washed over her, carrying her closer to the place she'd so long been denied. His fingers teased at the opening, barely entering her then retreating. She writhed and bucked as the Hawk held her thighs and devoured her sex.

He rose from his feast and Adita cried out, desperate.

He knelt on the bed, his cock pulsing, the veins bulging. A transparent pearl crowned the glory. The Hawk smiled at her, his lips glistening with her juices. He stroked his cock with pride, towering, his gaze afire with domination.

She stared at him for a moment, confused, and then followed his glance down at his cock, understanding.

Adita rose to her knees and moved to him. Yes, she thought, dazed. She should know his body as well as he knew hers.

Only inches separated their chests and the Hawk's cock stood like a sentry, a molten rod pressed between them. Her hands caressed his shoulders and she kissed him, hot and deep. Then she pulled away, kissing his throat and the strong pulse that pounded there. Slowly she licked and bit his chest, down over the hard ripples of his abdomen until her cheek brushed the bulbous head of his cock. With a slight turn of her head, her tongue reached out and lapped up the small

stream of pre-come that had descended down the head.

His large hand stroked her hair, then spread over the top of her pate like a living crown, guiding her head over his cock.

She squelched the slight twitch of protest that tickled her chest and parted her lips over the swollen head, forming a tight ring around the impressive organ. She descended, her tongue flickering over the ridge, then cradling the heavy shaft as she took him deep into her mouth. She began a rhythm, slow at first, opening her throat to take his cock in, working her way down, her tongue retreating as she ascended, then descended again, taking a little more of him past the gateway of her lips.

The Hawk groaned, his body rocking for a moment with the steady rhythm she set until he growled with impatience and his hand pushed her head down, forcing her to take even more of his cock into her mouth. She suppressed a gag and ascended quickly, flickering over the head to cover her shock. Slowly she parted her lips and released the shaft, kissing the tip tenderly.

He grinned, clueless, and stroked Adita's arms as he lowered her to the bed. His kisses began anew, but he did not linger. There was urgency in his strokes and bites, and soon her pulse raced with her own impatience. His tongue again parted

the folds of her sex and ravaged her clit, then slid beyond the border of her pussy, darting attacks that drove her to the edge of madness. He rose from her cunt, his knees forcing her legs apart. With cock in hand, he traced the head along the lips, bouncing it against her clit, teasing. Adita writhed and groaned. She was more than ready to have him fuck her.

Once around, twice, the head slid easily along the track of her pussy, teasing the entrance with a tentative entry. She arched, her arms above her head, fingers gripping the pillows as if she hung at the edge of a cliff. With a confident grin, the Hawk positioned his cock and plunged deep into her, filling her in an instant.

Bolts of sensation shot through her, pooling at her fingertips and flowing back to her center.

He gripped her hips, pulling her to him as he thrust deep into her, burying himself totally with each blinding thrust.

She moved with him, her body wanton in its pursuit of bliss. Time lost meaning as they fucked, their bodies locked together in passion. The Hawk's rhythm rose and fell, some strokes he only half thrust into her, others he plunged so deep she thought his cock would stab at her heart. He filled her and the sensation delighted her. She felt the waves mounting, felt herself approaching the place where all things disappeared except

unbounded ecstasy.

He pulled free from her and Adita protested loudly, "No!"

The Hawk grinned, "Good to know you like cock, my lady. Would hate to think I was wasting my time."

He stretched on the bed beside her, his shining prick impudent against gravity. He pulled Adita to him, over him. She smiled broadly as she straddled him. Her dripping cunt coated the base of his cock as she took a seat. She grinned at him as she squirmed, his pulsing shaft bouncing against her clit as she leaned over and kissed him, her tongue twining with his.

He growled, low and primal, the sensation vibrating through her sex. He lifted her slightly and guided his cock back to the portal. She hovered for a moment but before she could settle over his staff, his hands closed around her hips and he pulled her down. Her sex welcomed the invader, wrapping tight around him. Adita groaned as waves of pleasure replaced her momentary disappointment at his eagerness.

She set the rhythm again, slow and thorough, rising to almost release him completely from her grip, then descending to grind her sex against the thick curls that surrounded the base of his cock. His hands moved to her breasts, massaging pleasantly, his fingers rolling the nipples between

them. Then one hand went to her sex, his thumb massaging her clit as she rode him.

Ripples grew to waves as her pleasure mounted. Her center became a song of purest sensation, ready for the finale, to sing one last high note in completion of an aria. She began to pant, the pace of the ride growing faster. Her eyes closed as Zenthe filled her being, reveling in the pleasure of the union. The bud of her clit, swollen and hard, sent blasts of sensation to Adita's core as climax approached. Her sex held tightly to the Hawk's cock, desperate to enfold the slick steel as she rose and fell upon him. Her panting turned to deep keening as the gates of bliss yawned before her.

He gripped her thighs as if he gripped the neck of a horse, his short nails digging into her soft skin. He pulled Adita down hard, thrusting up into her at the same time, fast, hard, tearing the flesh of her sex with the force of his urgency. The shock of it thrilled her, but destroyed the rhythm of the coupling, taking an edge off her pleasure. Once, twice, deep, desperate.

The Hawk cried out like a wild man, his seed spilling hot and molten, his hard thrusts sending ripples of pleasure through her, but failing to push her into oblivion. The Hawk howled, as his grip loosened on her hips and his spent cock began to soften.

Zenthe's frustration filled Adita's soul. She pushed his hands away from her hips, pulled herself free from his diminishing cock, and scrambled from the bed on legs as weak as a newborn foal's. She collapsed on the floor a few feet from the bed, tears streaming down her cheeks as overwhelming sorrow ravaged her soul.

"No," Adita cried out. "NO!"

Upon the bed, the Hawk turned to her, his satiated smile turning into a frown of realization as he stared at her prostrate on the floor.

Then his screams of agony pierced the temple. Swirling, white, blinding flames consumed him, merciless and beyond reasoning.

Agony where once had been a man, and yet the bed remained untouched.

Adita screamed, horror and failure quickly replacing her sexual frustration. Her cries carried beyond the walls, unbroken and heartrending.

She curled into a ball, her screams turning to dumb silence as she watched in mute anguish as the Hawk burned entirely to ash.

And as the flame winked out, Adita's eyes closed. Overwhelmed and desolate, she retreated into black unconsciousness.

Fleeing frustration and horror and the dread anticipation of what must follow.

Flying on black wings far from the sorrow of Zenthe.

Chapter 8

Casmin lay sprawled on his back on the floor of the hall he had been guarding. Rivah lay prone between his spread legs, her cheek resting against his thigh. She held his cock, soft but already showing new promise, in the ring of her thumb and forefinger, stretching it upward. With slow, languid movements, she licked the underside of his shaft in long savoring trails, from base to head.

Every time he moved or tried to shift to change the angle of Rivah's assault, she flicked a sharp nail down the inside of his thigh. Soon he had stopped showing any signs of resistance to her leisurely feasting.

Rivah and Casmin had already fucked twice and she intended to have him once more before dawn. Somewhere between the first coupling and the second, he'd told her his name. She laughed then, absurdity bubbling deep within. She was a priestess of Zenthe, and this young soldier

honestly thought she'd remember his name in a week.

But by the time she quit coming at the end of their second fuck, Rivah had every intention of remembering this soldier.

He had a gift worth giving.

She buried her head between the hard muscles of his thighs and tongued the spot just below the base of his cock until he groaned a little and stroked her shoulder.

She flicked him hard and then bit the ragged red line, her mouth wild on the sweet, sticky flesh.

Casmin laughed and caught her suddenly between his thighs, deftly turning her, as he scrambled up, spent bliss quickly turning into fire again. Caught in the hard vice of his legs, Rivah grinned with anticipation of their third coupling, a trickle of excitement burning in her cunt as she fought helplessly in his embrace.

The world trembled.

The pounding of the drums grow suddenly much louder even as Casmin's thighs covered her ears. Penetrating vibrations shook the very walls. She felt the boom, boom, boom, and knew the moment of truth must be occurring in Zenthe's bed, the crescendo of a thousand climaxes, throughout the temple and all across the land, the hope of every man and woman in the world resting in the ecstatic screams of the high priestess.

Or lost in the cries of her courtier.

Rivah's heart beat faster as Casmin loosened the grip of his legs, and pulled her up and to him, crushing her against him in a grinding, promising embrace, though the expression on his face changed even as they came together.

The pounding had become a roar, a series of explosions so loud that Rivah's ears ached.

"The drums," Casmin whispered his eyes wide and glazed with uncertainty. Emotions collided and churned in Rivah's gut. A surge of fear and a whisper of guilt preceded a tiny shadow of regret that she might never fuck Casmin a third time, but mostly what stirred in her soul was a sense of glorious triumph, and the potential promise of immortal pleasure.

Rivah held tight to Casmin.

"No," she purred into his ear. "Not drums, my lover. That is the voice of the mountain."

All they needed now was to find some way to survive the imminent cataclysm.

"That is Zenthe's Sorrow."

Part 2: Opening the Gate

Chapter 1

*A*ditā stretched, lazy in the heat of the summer sun. Across her back and bare, round butt, the sun turned her skin to bronze even as it thinned her blood and pulled her toward sleep. She loved this time of year. The young trees and thin scrub that grew beneath the rim of the crater rattled with birdsong and the calls of day-foragers. The gentle breeze purchased freedom for a few defiant strands of her long blonde hair, still wet from swimming in Zenthe's Mirror. High, fair-weather clouds turned patches of sky into white fields of perfectly cultivated mist rows. The mountain had begun truly to heal. New shoots of green had emerged in spring, dotting the last expanses of blackened waste that marred the furrowed ashen face.

Five years had passed since the last of Zenthe's molten tears dried, after five turbulent years of frequent trembling, molten flows of liquid rock, and unexpected falls of hot, white ash. As the mountain had healed, so had Adita. She barely

remembered the first year that followed the cataclysmic failure of the Rite. After the Hawk's death, as the mountain thundered and spat fire into the sky, the priestess did not wake fully for seven days. When she had finally been roused, sorrow overwhelmed her, taking her breath and stealing her voice. She neither knew nor cared that her guards had literally carried her from her chamber to safety, shortly before the ceiling fell in furious condemnation of her failure. Full half the temple suffered damage, some of it severe. Many priestesses had been injured and a few had died. Zenthe's chamber had lost two supporting columns and, for those first three years after the Hawk's death, rites were held outside in the gardens and woods untouched by Zenthe's sorrow.

In the first year, an army of workers arrived, from all over Corsinium, great caravans of tree-hauling carts and wagons bearing marble and agate, all the materials needed to rebuild what had been lost, to begin the appeasement of Zenthe and restore balance. Stone was quarried from the mountain rock pits and carried up the face to the temple, replacing the fallen walls and arches of buildings all around the rim, so that the ancient white walls grew mottled with gray patches that would be bleached by time. New furniture and décor crafted by devout artisans joined the

heirlooms salvaged from the fire and ruin. Men from the south erected a great forge down in the pit of the mountain and poured the ore output of four provinces into burning cauldrons and molds of stone, making hinges and bandings that would lace the walls and stand in hope against the next outpouring of the goddess' grief.

No province failed in their tribute to the temple, even as their own lands and industries suffered. Adita knew all too well how far the misery of those first dour years stretched beyond the temple walls. Crops died, forest fires threatened the old wood forests of the north, floods took entire fishing villages, and three harsh winters thinned the herds of wild beasts so that even the hunters' larders lay bare.

"Your grace, it's time to return." The rich timbre of Casmin's voice reached through the languid haze where Adita floated. She groaned softly and rolled onto her back, her eyes refusing to look toward her captain. A soft breeze brushed over her skin, cooling her slightly even as the sun kissed the rose of her nipples, caressing them with heat that brought them to quick peaks. The memory of a man long ago came to her suddenly, a favorite lover from the time before Zenthe blessed her, a Durshan ranger with strong hands. In her reverie, he lay beside her in the warm summer sun, his touch sending her sun-thinned

blood racing. She remembered how he had pulled her erect nipple between his teeth, his tongue teasing the stretched flesh. Adita's eyes half opened and her breath quickened, remembering how sweet the bliss had been when he had finished fucking her. She held tight to the remembered bliss that he and others had given her. Never would she forget his talented tongue. It alone had brought her to orgasm over and over again.

Her hand slowly slid down her belly, fingers slipping between the still curls, a single delicate digit breaching the cleft to find a damp reception. Wanton, her legs parted slightly, one knee bent and fanning like a wing. She took her fingers away from her eager pussy and brought them to her lips. She held the image of her long-gone ranger, his short, white blonde hair and sapphire blue eyes, his muscled shoulders and arms, and the sweetest calluses on his thumbs that offered her nipples just the right amount of roughness.

Adita suckled her fingers, her phantom lover's hands and impish grin fully formed in her memory. Again her fingers slipped beyond the borders of her sex. Slick with her own saliva and the juices inspired by her memory, her fingers worked to emulate the ranger's sweet tongue. They stroked and massaged the folds of her sex and made shallow forays beyond the threshold of

her pussy, one finger, then two, filling her, stretching her slightly as they plunged in and out again and again.

Before she knew it, her other hand was in her mouth, the long slender fingers soon coated in saliva. To her breast, nipple hard with her rising passion, she teased and massaged, pulling at the peak, fondling and squeezing, her whole hand filling with the sensitive orb. Adita moaned softly as her pulse began to echo in her ears and a ball of sensation pushed out from her core to every part of her body.

Her whole center ached sweetly with her self-pleasure. Her clit, continuously stroked by the ball of her thumb as she pumped her fingers in and out, brought her to the rim of climax. She slipped another soaked finger in. Her hips instinctively began to gyrate as her attentions to her breast became more urgent and demanding. Images of other lovers from long ago floated before her, the intense expression on their faces when they fucked her. She remembered how hard she came.

Sensation swelled and crashed against the walls of her skin. She cried out, her pussy closing around her fingers, sucking at them as she bucked and writhed. She reached the precipice and gladly threw herself over the edge. She came, long and sating, tension that had built over the last few days, physical and emotional, flowed out of her.

She slowed her fingers, removing them from her slick pussy, petting the outer folds gently, caressing them with praising strokes.

As if from the edge of a dream, a strained voice reached her. "Your grace."

Adita turned her head lazily toward the voice and opened her eyes fully. Standing only an arm's length from the rock, Casmin stared down at her, his eyes shining with desire, his cock threatening to burst the seams of his trousers.

She smiled up at him, her gaze fixing pointedly on his crotch then meeting his stormy brown eyes. "I see you have been diligent in your job. You have watched me. Closely, it seems."

Casmin's voice strained, but stayed even as his smile stretched across his face. "Trust me, your grace. It is my pleasure."

"Casmin, when we are alone, you will call me Adita. I will not tell you again."

He handed her the sheer garment she had discarded hours before when she dove into the water of the Mirror. "You said that yesterday, your grace. And the day before."

She glowered, mocking his disobedience. "Stubborn. That's why Kai recommended you for the post, isn't it?"

Casmin grinned. "He recommended me because he knew I could swim."

Adita laughed as she pulled the garment over

her head. Camsin handed her the thin golden cords that cinched the garment at her waist, but she waved them away and stretched on the rock again, happy to soak up more heat.

“You’re going to be late, your grace.”

Adita sighed, nodding. “All right, you tyrant. Let’s go.” She sat up, taking Casmin’s offered hand, and rose to her feet.

She looked at him, smiling as a different kind of warmth crept through her skin. He’d grown so much in the ten years she’d known him. He was slightly taller, and years of training and, sadly, the hard work of putting the temple back together had layered his chest, arms, and legs with thick slabs of muscles. His face had lost the last traces of youth, replaced by the angles and strong jaw of a handsome man. He offered his arm to her, as he had so many times in the past and she took it, walking next to him comfortably.

Their relationship had matured as well. Casmin and Kai had kept desperate watch over her those first few years. Kai, much to the ire of the temple guard commander, had taken to sleeping outside Adita’s door at the request of her two personal attendants, Nassa and Coroh. Then Kai became high captain of the guard during those terrible dark days and his occasional dalliances with visitors and dignitaries no longer resulted in loss of rank. When a construction accident claimed the

life of the guard commander, Kai had ascended to the post and he gave Adita's personal protection entirely over to Casmin. Then, Casmin became high captain, but still they spent at least part of every day together. The distance between them, born of rank and ceremony, slowly melted away, replaced with respect and friendship.

"The Kahmudjan envoys arrive this afternoon, your grace," Casmin reminded her, his tone serious. "Will you receive them?"

She shrugged. "I will, though I wish I knew why they were coming."

His voice tightened with concern. "In Tilanta, it is said that the Kahmujans preached the burning of the temple. In other places too, they have led the attacks upon your priestesses."

"I know," Adita acknowledged. She stroked his arm with her fingers, trying to will him to relax. "But we cannot turn their envoy away. We have an army here, Casmin, should we need it."

"Do you trust them?" He asked pointedly.

She held silent for a few steps. "They do not have to be our enemies. They are not unbelievers. They do not deny Zenthe's existence, or her power. It is her role in the cycle of life that we disagree on."

"You didn't answer my question," he prodded.

She sighed. "Trust them? No, I don't trust them."

The comfort she had taken, from the sun, from her own touch, from the warmth of Casmin's muscled arm faded into worry. The Kahmudjan sect was only one of a dozen concerns that darkened the world. Foremost among the burdens she carried was the absence of any would-be suitors. Since the Hawk, no man had dared even the minor rites and the emptiness swallowed Adita into the pallid shadow of Zenthe's loneliness.

The land suffered for the goddess' frustration.

Within the temple, Adita heard the whispers and sensed the power of her command faltering. Even at the mountain's rim, there were new beliefs and whispered heresies. Some of the priestesses pursued rites that were darker than the goddess' customary practices, and even some of the grand orgies had taken on a desperate cast.

She wondered if the Kahmudjans might offer a kind of hope, that their visit might be an excuse for a revival of Zenthe's core faith.

"But we will greet them as we would other guests," she told him. "Such is my will."

A rasp of disapproval framed Casmin's reply. "They do not respect Zenthe or our ways. They'd as soon see you in chains as negotiate with you."

Adita grinned, a tickle of rebellion reminding her of days long past. "Now there's an idea. Chains might be fun."

He turned to her, his gaze as serious as his frown. "Those are not the kind of chains I mean, your grace."

She elbowed him gently. "Oh, lighten up. And trust me. If I thought a rousing bout of bondage games would help relax the Kahmudjans and make them more reasonable, I'd tie them up myself."

He smiled uneasily, then chuckled and extended his stride to walk in front of her, up the path to the back gate of the temple. With a surety born of repetition, he unlatched the gate and held it open for her.

She stepped through and turned back to regard him with a look of gratitude and warmth, before allowing herself the pleasure of stroking the hard lines of his chest.

"I will greet them, Casmin, and make them welcome, but stay near me this evening. Remember always how much I need you." Then she kissed him lightly upon the lips and walked alone into the temple of the goddess.

Chapter 2

High atop a hill, Sul Tarkus addressed the men and especially the women of Nimdale, but his gaze looked past the little village below and toward the rolling hills. Beyond those hills lay the great desert, the creeping edge of desolation and death.

On the broad, flat crest of the hill, he preached among ancient stones, raised up and carved with figures and old words no one could read anymore. This was a site of great power once. Sul Tarkus felt the magic rise into him, filling his voice with conviction and compelling tones.

“People of Nimdale, you have shown great courage to face your foe, the desert. For ten years, your fight has grown increasingly desperate.” Sul thundered, his voice a sure mix of compassion and conviction.

“When the man we called the Hawk went to the temple of Zenthe, the hope of all these lands went

with him, and when he failed in his quest, hope died with him. Who, better than you know the consequences? The desert tribes the Hawk united broke apart again and war swept these lands. How can so peaceful a people combat a thousand old feuds renewed? Where was Zenthe when the countless grudges were remembered and celebrated with death and rapine?

"Blood has not fertilized this blighted ground and the curse of Zenthe's sorrow has dried your rivers and turned your soil to dust." Sul looked down for a moment, feeling the crowd stir. He looked up again, his gaze drifting across the ragged throng of nearly a hundred men and women. "Throughout Corsinium, crops have failed and cattle have died. Too many villages, here at the wasteland's rim, far from the security of the mountains and inner plains, are abandoned to those who take without asking. Murder and pillage joust with famine and disease to claim the greater part of your despair." The emotion of the crowd began to swell as Sul's voice fell silent. He paused until the people grew still again.

"We do not deny the goddess," He told the men and women of Nimdale, dressed in tunics of brown and gray, plain as the dirt they scratched for sustenance. Like rays of azure light falling among the crowd, three of his fellow priests and nearly a dozen priestesses, watched, all of them

clad in robes the color of a summer sky. "But Zenthe's power must be tempered and the hand of Kahmudj must find its place upon her shoulder.

"Her path must follow beside her lord's, as it was in the elder times."

Sul Tarkus embraced his role as the chosen of Kahmudj. The marks of the Allfather's favor lay clearly upon him. His eyes burned with his faith, deep and black as a seam of coal, with a gaze that could calm anger and stir unyielding devotion. He reveled in the strength of his own voice, speaking to the multitude so that every man and woman believed he spoke to them alone. Kahmudj's intangible gifts were his too, a sense of trust he could cast like a net or a warm cloak, an essence that flowed out of him like a river, washing the faithful and bringing doubters to bathe in the flood.

Strong of chin, with cheekbones cut like angles of stone, a broad nose above a full and sensuous mouth, Sul Tarkus had been told all his life that he was the handsomest man in all the world, and he allowed the priests and priestesses of Kahmudj to comb his long, brown hair into shining waves, and to dress him in robes of ivory silk, so that light played about him like a curtain.

Every day, more of the faithful believed he was the old god Kahmudj returned to flesh, and Sul did not deny their whispers.

"Help us," he intoned in his voice of compelling entreaty. "Share with us of your harvest. Build here again the old temple that has fallen. Praise Kahmudj and the desert will fall before your desires. The rivers will run deep again." He spread his arms, the ivory robe like shining wings, and he opened his hands to the sky just as the first drops of precious rain began to fall.

With his eyes closed, his full lips drawn back in a smile of utter gratitude, Sul Tarkus led the people of Nimdale in a reverent prayer of thanksgiving.

"Thanks be," he intoned, "for the hand of Kahmudj, for the hand that guides the goddess' mercy, for the flail that teaches her sorrow.

"All praise to Kahmudj.

"All praise to the lord who shall save her."

* * * *

Steady rain fell in a low whispering roar against the stretched fabric of Sul Tarkus' pavilion, pitched on the hill, not far from the ancient stones. Thick, oiled cloth kept the water at bay and lamplight cast soft, flickering shadows on the walls of rigid canvas worked with blocky embroidered images of the Allfather performing benevolent works and smiting his foes.

Austere screens divided the pavilion into

sections, and, for the moment, Sul occupied his private chamber within the cloth walls. This temporary home reflected his tastes; sparsely furnished with a low bed, a small square table and a pair of chairs, in one of which he sat. Before him on a parchment spread upon the table, weighed down by a bowl of plums, he wrote the narrative of the day's sermon. Rushes had been cast over the bare floor of his tent, but moisture seeped under the canvas edges and the smell of fertile earth lay heavy in the still air.

The day had been a glory, a triumph for Kahmudj. The village of Nimdale now praised the true lord. Sul wrote his account of the gathering, ending it with the sudden miracle of rain in a dry season. The parchment would be copied and spread by runners, carried to priests and priestesses across the land. In time, the elders' council would read it and know the power of Sul's gifts. He signed the statement with a flourish and rose from the chair.

A sky-robed priest emerged from behind a screen, and approached Sul with bowed head. "A woman of the village is here to see you." The priest paused, then added with the smallest hint of a smile. "She is very comely."

Sul Tarkus adjusted his white robe. "Bring her in," he said as he took a plum from the bowl and bit through its sweet, red skin. He turned his back

to the screen and contemplated the wisdom of Kahmudj that he would send a woman just at this moment.

Soft footfalls upon the rushes, a scent of flowers in the air, and a low, pleasing voice spoke behind him, "My lord, I need your help."

He turned slowly, letting the lamplight fall upon him like a golden veil. He allowed a slight smile to touch his lips as he regarded the woman.

She was no longer a girl, but a woman truly, perhaps thirty years of age. Long honey-colored hair framed a face that showed intelligence and character, as well as the symmetry of a master sculptor's touch. The belted tunic and long skirt she wore were cut to hide the lines of her figure, but Sul saw the full swell of her breasts beneath the tunic, her hips a little wide, but pleasing in their round perfection. She hardly dared look up at him, but when she did, the lamps' fire danced in eyes the color of brandy.

"Kahmudj will help you," he told her, confident in his assurance. "I am but his vessel."

"My name is Selete." The woman bowed her head. "In Nimdale, I teach our young the customs of our land, but I have no desires, my lord. Since my husband died, three summers ago, nothing moves my heart. I am as one dead."

"What happened to your husband?" Sul asked his voice warm with compassion.

"He was taken by the desert men," she replied, sorrow giving weight to her words.

Sul's ears burned with her story, one heard so often in the villages beside the desert. Desperation and slaughter had thinned the ranks of the warrior tribes until they turned to raiding the towns for slaves to fling at their foes. The towns grew hard as beaten iron beneath the assaults and, in time, they would turn to fighting to survive. Then in three seasons or four, there would be nothing, only sand in the weathered halls of their houses, white bone in the noonday sun. He smiled at the woman, letting her feel the magic of his gaze. "Come here," he compelled her.

Her full lips parted and he saw the tip of her tongue. Her breasts rose and fell with a quickening of her breath as she took two steps toward him. He captured her arms and embraced her.

Letting the power of Kahmudj ebb into her, Sul prayed for serenity in her heart, even as his hand found the sweet curve of her hip, full and warm even beneath her tunic and skirt. Her head rested against his chest and he stroked the fall of honey tenderly, and caressed the tight line of her back.

Kahmudj's gift flowed through him and he heard her breathing change again as she tilted her head up to him, brandy eyes shining, her lips seeking his, her body like fire against him.

His hands drank from her; impatient with the tunic and the skirt, he pulled one aside and the other up. He caressed her legs, long and firm-muscled, and easily removed the undergarment she wore. In a fluid movement, he turned her so that he stood behind her as she faced the simple table.

He stroked her side and breast and whispered through the honey veil into her ear. "Lean forward, Selete."

She obeyed him, palms down, her head thrown back, neck arched. Sul gathered her skirt in his hands and raised it, baring her round, smooth ass. He lifted his own white robe and thanked Kahmudj for all his gifts. Sul's prick rose, hard and red and almost as long as his forearm, the scepter of the Allfather's power.

Selete's eyes were closed as if she had fallen under a spell, her breathing already like a woman in the last throes of passion although Sul had hardly touched her. He took her thighs in his hands, marveling at the silken heat of them, and pushed them apart. The gates of pleasure opened before him.

"Praise Kahmudj," he said aloud as he placed the head of his cock just at her cunt lips. She flowed with sweet wetness, and he reveled in the sensation of her flesh against his before he thrust, slow and hard, relishing the slide of wet heat over

his cock. Selete uttered a series of short gasps as he penetrated deeper, as though she was unable to breathe, and she squirmed against him with a slow twist of her hips.

Sunken to the hilt, Sul moved within her and Selete screamed the scream of uncontrolled ecstasy as sudden in the muted thunder of the rain-battered tent as lightning across the dome of night. He ground again, merciless, the spirit of the Allfather within him, alive in the pulsing heat of his cock, buried inside Zenthe's sister.

The woman shuddered hard, a second orgasm ripping through her body, then a third, as he moved in and out of her, his eyes closed, his soul one with Kahmudj, the gift flowing out of him in golden waves, down his long cock and into her, finding the source of her pleasure, the very fire of oblivion, and fanning it to white heat.

He lifted her, limp and trembling, from the table, as she cried now with breathless wonder, and, keeping her impaled, he supported her weight and gently turned her over. She pivoted slowly on his shaft, one supple, well-muscled leg brushing his chest as she rolled. As she settled facing him, brandy eyes turned dark as smoke, her lips parted and she whispered little prayers.

Posed for a moment in the aspect of the Allfather holding Zenthe helpless, impaled upon his prick, Sul moved with smooth, steady rhythm.

He found the angle and penetrated her deeper still, in and out with slick, burning friction, his blood surging now too, the Allfather's gift his to bestow.

Sul slow-fucked Selete hard and deep. She cried out in short bursts, her eyes afire with ecstasy, her breasts free from the tunic and ruby-tipped, arching up, the aspect of Zenthe fulfilled beneath him. Another long, slow journey deep into the folds of Selete's wet cunt and Sul Tarkus came.

Obliterating light, a fullness in his soul, and the woman almost unknown beneath him. Pleasure consumed him as he worked himself into and out of her, his prick barely softening before the Allfather forged steel again.

He ground deep and felt her tighten around him as his thumb found the wet button of her clit and began to stroke it.

So they would pass the night, he mused. So they would greet the dawn.

* * * *

Sunlight turned the pavilion walls to hammered gold. Damp streaks faded in the dawn's corona and fingers of shadow caressed Selete's rounded thighs. Sul lay beside her upon the pallet, his leg entwined with the burning ivory of hers, his cock inching toward his knee, almost hard again.

Sometime in the night, Selete's tunic and skirt had been lost entirely and she lay naked in the golden red light. He regarded the fullness of her breasts, nipples swollen and nearly crimson, the line of her stomach, soft, round, and well-formed, the glory of her hips, and the tight lips of her cunt. Sul Tarkus whispered in her ear and stroked down her belly, he trailed through the honeyed thatch, and put his fingers in her. She stirred in languorous half-sleep and woke with a whimper.

He knew the source of her pleasure from the hours they had passed in the night, and he stroked there with slow circles. Selete, fully awake, moved with him, hips following the circles of his finger, writhing and pushing the hot nest of her cunt against his hand. He rolled atop her, his hand still deep inside her, and Selete's legs gripped him with crushing pressure as she bucked against him.

With a single motion, he withdrew his hand and entered her with Kahmudj's gift, sliding into her, hard and fast, and deep. Selete arched her neck and uttered a short scream, but Sul knew no restraint; Kahmudj knew no mercy. He drove hard, three times, deeper with each thrust, and then he slowed, riding the shattering spasms of her body, riding her until the sun had risen halfway up the sky's dome and she had come a dozen times.

Selete's head rested on his shoulder, and she

whispered in his ear.

"I feared to seek you. They said your god does not favor Zenthe's pleasure."

Sul propped himself on an elbow and looked at Selete. He let Kahmudj's love wash over her, bathing her in light and truth.

"Kahmudj does not forbid pleasure," he told her, his voice low but strong. "But he does not favor hollow excess."

"I used to serve Zenthe," Selete said and looked at him with worshipful brandy eyes. Then she gasped a little and covered herself with the throw, turning her gaze to the screen that divided the pavilion and the two men who slid it aside and filed into the room.

Sky-robed priests.

"My lord," one of them offered with head bowed. "We must travel before noon if we are to make Damtown by nightfall."

Sul Tarkus rose from the pallet and stretched, his body long and lean, bare to the air and all eyes within the room. Turning to Selete, he drew the throw away from her firmly and offered her his hand.

She took it and tried to cover her pussy with her other hand, her cheeks aflame from the calm, approving gazes of the two priests.

"No shame, sister," Sul instructed and helped her to her feet, taking both her hands and raising

her arms, until they pointed straight at the pavilion ceiling. One of the priests stepped nearer to her, his robe close enough to brush her breasts as he reached up.

Like the sky's own wine, silken fabric fell in waves from his hands, a robe of blue that shimmered as it cascaded down Selete's arms, over the round glory of her shoulders, and further down, clinging to her breasts, covering her smooth stomach and round perfect hips.

Resplendent in the golden day, Selete bowed her head humbly before him. Sul lifted her chin and kissed her on the forehead.

"You will serve Zenthe again," he said, the timbre of his voice like warm wine. "When my god has made her his bride."

Chapter 3

Perfect blocks of alabaster marble placed in a random pattern bestowed upon the chamber that held Zenthe's Cup the illusion of absent-minded beauty. Some of the truncated columns rose only a few feet above the blue tiled floor, while others soared over the luxurious pool of water that stood atop the highest tower of the temple. Bowl-shaped, the Cup was Rivah's favorite place. In winter, the pool steamed and smoked, kept warm by massive fires beneath the smooth bath. In summer, the waters were cool and refreshing, and the warm breezes that buffeted the peak provided her a sense of power, the essence of something unseen and untamable.

More than any other place in the palace, the Cup filled Rivah with a sense of home.

And she knew her pleasure was heightened by the fact that Adita found no special pleasure from the Cup, in spite of it being one of the most holy of

sanctuaries. Rivah didn't know why Adita rarely used the shimmering pool, considering the Cup was reserved for her alone. Over the years, Rivah chafed against the mandates of the order that barred lesser priestesses from the Cup except on a handful of holy days in the company of the High Priestess. Where was the fairness? The Cup's legend held that the blessed waters purified the bathers and that the divine grace of Zenthe aided in preserving the eternal life of her chosen daughter.

And maybe that too was why Rivah loved to visit the Cup. Every time she ascended the stairs and emerged onto the rooftop sanctuary, a tickle of dark rebellion filled her stomach. She had first come to the Cup not long before she'd ascended to First Priestess four years ago. Since then, Rivah had come to think of the Cup as *her* private sanctuary. She swam there often, savoring the sensual caress of the water on her skin, embracing the excitement she often felt as the water swirled around her nipples and flowed across her pussy.

Maybe the myths were true; maybe bathing in the waters had helped to preserve her beauty. Ten years had passed since the failure of the Hawk and her beauty had deepened, but not faded. She lived on the cold side of thirty winters, yet many thought her barely over twenty.

Any minor guilt Rivah felt for her part in the

Hawk's failure had quickly faded in the arduous aftermath of that fatal night. In the days immediately following the eruption, everyone suffered under the yoke of manual labor and shortages of necessities, everyone that was, except the High Priestess. Rivah's hatred of Adita grew with each passing day, and her secret hopes that Adita would throw herself off a cliff in a fit of despair quickly began to morph into delicious fantasies of pushing the sanctimonious bitch off the side of the mountain. Rivah clawed her way into position for selection as the new High Priestess, but Adita provided Rivah no opportunity to succeed her.

And time did her no favors. Beautiful Rivah remained, but the truth of her age yoked her existence and time could not be turned back. New High Priestesses represented the sweetest fruit, the most desirable women, young, but mature enough to wear the mantle, learned in Zenthe's gifts, but fresh enough to inspire the masses. With the passing of her twenty-fifth winter, Rivah's hopes to be High Priestess died by the doctrine of Zenthe's law. No matter what happened to Adita, Rivah's ambitions to become High Priestess burned away, leaving behind black, charred remains, the bitter ashes of spite and hatred.

So Rivah set her sights on Moya, the First Priestess. It had hardly been a challenge to bring

her predecessor down and little more of a feat to manipulate the election to First Priestess. Rivah's ruthless determination won her the prize, in spite of Adita's visible misgivings. Rivah had played to the masses well, and the High Priestess found she could not go against the consensus of the majority of matrons and elders.

Beside the Cup, Rivah stretched upon the thick fur rug like a cat waking from a midday nap. She turned on her side and looked at the sleeping form of her lover. She'd have to thank the Pavrian emissary for the gift. The young man had been most enthusiastic in embracing his role as Rivah's escort for the night. She reached out and stroked down the young man's lean body, her blood quickening as she explored the curves, rises, and hollows of his chest and stomach. The thick mat of black hair that surrounded his cock added a new sensual texture to her explorations. On cue, the impressive length began to swell as her feathery touch turned the quickly stretching skin into a velvet rod she very much wanted to taste.

Rivah slid down his body, her lips and teeth blazing a trail of expectation. His cock was fully erect and pulsing by the time her chin brushed the edge of the mat.

"Time to praise the sacred kiss of Zenthe, Liminos."

Liminos rose on his elbows and watched Rivah,

his eyes a storm of unrestrained lust. Rivah grinned, eager to remind the Pavrian who it was that honored him so.

She licked her lips, reveling in the darkening of Liminos' gaze and the deep breath he took and held. She loved how easily men folded when a talented tongue bathed their cocks. In Rivah's years as a priestess, not once had she seen a man fail to become supplicant to her once she fixed her lips around his prick. Liminos, a skilled lover but a simple man, would cut his own heart out for her before she was finished with him.

Just the tip, wet, the lightest texture of fine sugar, whispered the promise of pure pleasure in a single stroke of his thick, red head. Pre-come glistened from the cleft eye and eagerly she pulled the crystal dew onto her tongue, savoring the salty, silky drop. The man groaned, his engorged length reaching even further toward her awaiting mouth. He reached for her head, but she ducked away from him, her long red hair wrapping around his cock like a horse's bridle. Wicked pleasure filled Rivah's belly as her respect for Liminos plummeted. No control, no restraint for the game.

And he must be made to pay for breaking her unspoken rules.

"No!" She commanded. "Do not touch me."

She rose to her knees between his legs, sitting

back on her heels, solemn, cold. Liminos looked at her, his confidence shattered, but he did not move, his cock losing a little of its life at the sudden lack of attention, as well as the threat of neglect.

Rivah's smile came slowly. Maybe she wouldn't have him cut his heart out after all.

Her hands slid up his thick thighs, fingers kneading the slabs of his muscles. As her fingers reached the apex, her thumbs slid down along the hairline, almost brushing the base of his cock. She didn't rest her hands a moment, but continued up his hard belly, over his wide chest, her arms stretched, her torso hovering over his dick, the tip a breath away from her stiff nipples.

Rivah slowly lowered herself, allowing her breasts to caress his shaft. Liminos' hand reached for her again, but one sharp glance and he lowered it, his head falling back, exposing his throat to her like a lamb's before a blade.

She did not hesitate further. Parting her lips, she plunged his cock into her mouth as if she starved. Down, her tongue flattened with the weight as she filled her mouth and throat until she took him all the way in. Hard, fast, she suckled him, feasting, her tongue flickering like a thick whip as she ascended, her teeth barely raking the sensitive flesh, just enough to send small shivers coursing through him.

Relentless, she brought the Pavrian to the

height of his erection and then, with a slow, lingering withdrawal, she pulled completely away from his glistening prick.

Liminos' stricken expression pulled dark laughter from Rivah. "Fear not, lover. I'm not finished with you yet, but remember, do not touch me."

She straddled him. His cock, rock hard and fully erect, rose like a spire from his hips. Rivah swayed, brushing the swollen head with her slick pussy.

He moaned, his hands reaching for her hips. She froze, the head of his cock nestled against her hardened clit, still as glass until his hands fell like stones to the fur mat.

She smiled. Nothing intoxicated her more than control and power over a man. Without another moment's hesitation, she angled her hips and slid hard and fast down Liminos' cock. His prick filled her, his velvet flesh hot and hard, driven all the way to her center. Rivah arched her back, her eyes closed, savoring the sensation of him deep inside her.

Slowly she began her ride, rising and falling, each sure ascent sending sweet waves of longing through her middle, but the longing quickly died as she fell back. Liminos' shaft pinned her to him, the pleasure building as her flesh closed tight around him, crushing him between the slick folds.

Her pace increased as did her breathing, her hands roamed over her body and played with her stiff nipples. One hand parted the wet curls of her cunt, exposing her pussy to the sweet air. She knew just how to stroke her clit, just how to pull the maximum pleasure from her ride. Expertly her fingers circled her clit, massaging the bud to swollen fulfillment. Liminos' hips moved beneath her, bucking, driving his cock even deeper as the ride became wild and uncontrolled. Pleasure rolled through her like storms across a bay, each more dramatic than the one before, until her fingers and the raucous rhythm they set sent Rivah over the edge, an explosion of color and light blinding her as rancorous bliss pulled a cry of pleasure from her lips. Liminos' hands fell to her hips. He pulled her down hard as he thrust into her three long, hard times, his come flooding her pussy, his own cry echoing hers.

But the cry she heard, the voice that called her name in sharp anger was not his.

"Rivah!"

Not the cry of a lover at all.

Adita.

Rivah's eyelids flew open, the thrilling pulse of pleasure that rippled through her suddenly stilled by the harsh reprimand that edged the High Priestess' voice.

There in the archway that lead to the Cup,

Adita, dressed in the shimmering translucent silks of office, stood with the shadows of at least two men behind her.

Adita turned quickly to address the shadows. Rivah recognized them as the Kahmudjan priests who had arrived only yesterday.

"Your graces, my apologies," Adita said coolly. "Please, if you would wait for me in the Great Chamber, I will be with you momentarily."

The men's footsteps echoed away and the sound of the golden gate that opened onto the Cup sounded like a death knell.

Rivah rolled off Liminos. She started to pull on her robe, then stopped, frozen by Adita's stare. The High Priestess' expression chilled her; forest green eyes flared with anger, the golden flakes within the orbs molten and unforgiving.

"You know this is a space sacred to Zenthe." Calm, controlled, yet hard and unyielding, Adita stared directly into Rivah's face.

"Your grace, please, let me explain." Rivah started, and then looked down, contrite. Liminos' come ran in an accusatory stream down her thigh. "Yes, your grace, I do. I..." Rivah glanced at the Pavrian, hatred for the young man blooming in her chest. The untamed lust of only moments ago moldered like so much old refuse. "I should have resisted him. I knew with the Kahmudj here, we wanted all our pilgrims to be as content as

possible. He...He wanted to be here. I tried to dissuade him, tried to take him to the pools."

Liminos looked at Rivah, his mouth ajar as she continued her tale. She glared at him, her gaze she hoped conveying the peril of disputing her.

Adita crossed her arms, the High Priestess' gaze falling to Liminos then back to Rivah.

"Rivah, this is not seducing the husband of a pilgrim or taking your lovers to the Great Chamber at your whim. You have broken the trust of Zenthe. You've broken mine, and your blasphemy is publicly known — by the Kahmudjans no less." Adita looked down for a moment, shaking her head.

Fear twisted in Rivah's gut. The image of her hands wrapping around Adita's throat and killing the High Priestess danced dangerously close to the surface of her desires. An eternity in an instant, Rivah struggled against her dark fantasy, swallowing her hatred with effort. If she killed Adita, she's never live to see the next sunrise, but death might be a blessing given the alternative.

Adita might well dismiss her from the order entirely and, if Rivah knew nothing else, it was that she was not made to work menial jobs just to eat. She was a priestess and she liked it.

"Please, Adita, forgive me. Please, help me find a way to seek Zenthe's forgiveness." Rivah slipped to her knees before Adita, her plea equally sincere

and self-serving.

"Dismissal is in order, Rivah."

"Adita, please — your grace, would not my dismissal only perpetuate the scandal? If you dismiss your First Priestess, would that not just feed the Kahmudjan's low opinions of us? Is not compassion part of Zenthe's teachings? Forgiveness? Second chances?"

Adita looked down at Rivah, her face a mask. Silence fell upon the Cup, the breeze of only moments ago, still, as if the wind itself held its breath.

Adita stepped away from Rivah, beginning a slow stroll around the pool of crystal water. Rivah followed her with her gaze, her heart racing. She took the moment to pull her robe over her head, as if to hide her nakedness would hide her guilt.

"You're right, Rivah. One of Zenthe's great rewards is found in the challenges issued when wrong is done another. Here is your choice. I can dismiss you now. You may leave with two gems, a robe, and a walking staff, as is our tradition, or I will send you on an errand of great importance to the outlying lands. Our temples and priestesses have been struggling these years since...my failure. You will go to the very edge of the wasteland for the most vital of purposes. This year, you will open the Gate. Then you will remain in Damtown to rekindle the faith of the

people. You will remain there until I send for you.

"There will be few amenities, if any. There will be no down pillows and lavish meals. It will be hot, dusty, and quite possibly dangerous, but do this, bring Zenthe's blessings to the people of the desert, be true to Zenthe, and the rank of First Priestess will remain yours."

The rush of blood from her face left Rivah faint. She had heard many stories about the outlands, about the violence and harsh living conditions. In the last ten years, three of the priestesses who traveled west had opened the dam but they had not returned, their fates unknown, save perhaps by lowland vultures.

Adita's choice hardly seemed a choice at all

Rivah looked at Adita as the High Priestess came to stand before her. "I will accept the challenge, your grace; accept this task as my redemption – in Zenthe's eyes, and yours." Rivah lowered her head to the ground, her stomach almost turning as she kissed Adita's feet. "Thank you, your grace, for your compassion."

"Don't thank me yet, Rivah. You may ask for the gems and robe before all is over." Rivah rose from her prostrate position, resting her hands in her lap in demure gratitude, her gaze downward in a show of supplication.

"Be ready to leave at dawn, Rivah. And do not let me see you again until you return."

Adita turned and walked away, leaving Rivah on her knees.

As the sound of the gate rang across the Cup, Rivah cast her gaze upward to the cloud-smeared sky, and whispered thanks to Zenthe in the same breath she cursed Adita.

"I'll go, you bitch, but don't think I won't return."

Chapter 4

The massive doors of the Chamber of Zenthe whispered shut, closing out the beam of light that had fallen briefly onto the floor from the hall beyond. Adita tried to still her heart as Casmin's footsteps announced his arrival. She sat upon the throne at the top of the dais beneath the massive, blue-shrouded statue of Zenthe. She tried to steel her resolve to do what was best for all the faithful. Standing beside her, Kai squared his shoulders, his hands falling behind his back as he donned the invisible cloak of authority.

Casmin emerged from the shadows and approached her. Adita's breath caught as the torchlight set his golden tunic aflame. Her gaze devoured the sight of him. Over the ten years since he had first escorted her to the lake, she had watched Casmin mature, not only into an effective guard Captain, but into one of the most exquisite men she had ever known, and one of the very few

she trusted. Now, as he approached her, the sweet thrill of woman filled her as his warm brown eyes met her gaze for one precious moment. The moment passed all too quickly and her Captain replaced her friend. He advanced with confident but deferential steps, awaiting her command.

At the bottom stair Casmin stopped, his feet placed precisely, his posture as rigid as a board. He bowed reverently to her, holding the bow, as custom dictated. Kai cleared his throat. All the playfulness and banter that had passed between the three of them seemed a distant memory to Adita. Was it only a few days ago she had laughed with Casmin at the lake? Duty presided now, and she ached with the weight of it. She lifted her hand in an elegant release and Casmin rose to stand at attention before her and Kai.

"For the greater glory of Zenthe," Casmin recited the traditional supplication, staring straight ahead, waiting.

Kai's hands unclasped behind his back, his arms crossing over his chest, one hand playing through the close-cropped, graying beard that covered his chin.

"Casmin, what do you know about Damtown?" Kai asked, his tone even.

Casmin's shoulders relaxed in reflection of Kai's less strict stance. A slight smile touched his lips. "Some, sir. The flow of the Bliss River into the

western wasteland is controlled through the dam there."

Kai nodded, his fingers stilling in his beard. "Our ancestors built the dam so long ago that the secret of its building is lost. The operation of the gates is a sacred ritual. Zenthe's temple has tended the dam and ensured that the bounty of the River Bliss flows fairly to all the west lands. So it has been for many generations."

Adita looked at Kai even as her commander glanced at her, his eyes hard with purpose. He looked back at Casmin, the silence in the chamber rushing in to fill the sudden void.

"On the morrow, at sunrise, you will take a small company of guards and leave with the caravan headed west. You will proceed to Dامتown and ensure that the ceremony is fulfilled, survey the security of the dam, supplement the garrison there if you must, or, if more guards are needed, send for whatever reinforcements are necessary."

Casmin's expression never changed as his gaze stayed fixed on Kai, but Adita recognized the shock he felt as he blinked once, then turned straight forward, his gaze penetrating her to focus on the feet of the towering statue behind her.

"Yes, sir. If it is Zenthe's will."

Kai's tone never softened. "Casmin, this is less about Zenthe's will and more about my need for

someone I can trust to see the job done right. Disturbing news from the outlands has raised too many questions, and the Kahmudjan emissaries who just left here seemed of little mind to negotiate and more inclined to demand. That has never been their way before. Something has changed and all indications would point to their gaining power in the west and feeling they can challenge our authority to represent Zenthe's generosity. The dam on the Bliss River is critical. We have carefully protected the provinces on both sides of the dam during floods and droughts, without prejudice and disregarding all politics. It must ever be so, Casmin. The dam must remain under the protection of Zenthe."

Casmin gave one curt nod. "Yes, sir."

Kai descended the stairs. Casmin turned slightly to face him as the older man gave him a hearty pat on the shoulder, then extended his hand. "I'd take the Fourth or the Seventh Guard with you. Leave the Eighth here with me. They're too green for such an operation."

Casmin took Kai's hand, the first hint of a smile touching his lips as he shook Kai's hand in the congenial manner of good friends. "Green, my eye." Casmin said. "You just like having all those young men around, you old goat."

Kai's laughter rang through the hall, lightening the mood and giving Adita the power to breathe

again. Kai glanced back at her, his eyes dancing with delight as he winked. "My secret's out, your grace."

"Kai, that secret's been out as long as you have been," Adita laughed, rising to her feet.

Kai grinned then looked at Casmin. "Secure the dam, Casmin. See that the ceremony is performed, then come home." Kai looked again at Adita, his mirth fading, but not his smile. "You belong here."

Kai released Casmin's hand, turned to face Adita, and bowed respectfully. "If you will excuse me, your grace, I need to write up the detail of Casmin's orders."

Adita nodded, her head barely returning to its natural position before Kai gave Casmin a final pat on the back. Then the commander turned and walked towards the back of the hall, his footsteps echoing over the smooth blue marble as the darkness swallowed him.

A flash of light at the back of the chamber announced Kai's departure and Adita's gaze fixed on Casmin. Slowly she descended the stairs, each step pounding the ache in her heart to further intensity. Casmin followed her down the stairs with his gaze, his expression unreadable. She stopped in the same place Kai had stood moments before, looked up into Casmin's face, and forced a smile to her lips, but the smile could not survive the heaviness that threatened to shatter her.

"I am sending the First Priestess to perform the ceremony," Adita said, barely successful in keeping her misgivings about Rivah out of her voice. "Then she is to tend the faithful in the outlands until we allow her to return. Please see that she makes it safely to Damtown. From there, she will have resources at her disposal to manage her tasks."

"Yes, your grace."

"Adita," Adita requested almost automatically. She glanced up at Zenthe, the massive marble statue their only witness, then looked back at Casmin, another smile touching her lips briefly.

"Come back soon, my captain. Kai will be a surly clod until you return to tell him all is well at the dam." She felt the tears gathering behind her eyes, even as she struggled against them.

She looked down at her hands clasped before her. The heat from Casmin's body radiated over her, pulling her nipples to peaks and caressing the cleft of her sex.

He reached out and lifted her chin, his thumb caressing her jaw line. When she looked at him again, a thin pane of tears coated her eyes. His fingers caressed her cheek, his touch light and lingering, burning a line of sweet ache through Adita's body, pooling the sensation in her heart and turning her skin to flame. The quiet pop and whirl of the torches bid to fill the hushed space of

the chamber with sound, but the emptiness damped it until only whispers tickled Adita's ears.

Casmin looked into her eyes, his beautiful doe-brown gaze reflecting the firelight with a glow that melted Adita's soul, but as always, she could not see beyond the caramel pools and know what he was feeling. She lifted her hand to caress his cheek in return, but before her fingers could find solace on his face, Casmin caught her hand in his own and pulled it to his lips, where he kissed the back of her fingers, respectful, and lingering into reverence.

Adita willed her eyes to stay open as the pain of his absence fully dawned on her. When would she laugh? Who would hear her?

Just above the whispers of the torches, Adita's voice shocked the quietude. "Please, come back to me, Casmin."

Casmin looked from her eyes and focused on her hand, which he slowly turned over, exposing her wrist to his gaze. Without hesitation he kissed the inside edge, the gentle heat of his lips igniting a blaze that soon filled her.

All possibilities filled her being, her mind whirled with color and light, and at the very core, a promise murmured so softly the rush of her blood in her ears masked its message.

Casmin lowered Adita's hand, uncurling his fingers and allowing gravity to break the embrace.

"I will return, your grace."

Casmin glanced up at the statue, then looked back at her, his eyes suddenly as rich and fathomless as sun-baked umber. "I promise you."

He bowed low to the statue of Zenthe, then to Adita, but she hardly saw him move. As his footsteps faded and the light from the hall finalized his passing, she turned to the torches and stared at the uncompromising flames through tears that finally fell over the edge of her lashes and trekked slowly down her cheeks.

Long minutes later, she looked up at Zenthe, the blue shroud as still as glass, and knew once again the awful ache of loneliness.

Would the goddess ever know fulfillment?

Would Adita?

* * * *

In the evening, Adita stepped into Zenthe's chamber, her bare feet silent on the cool marble floor. No torches lit the massive hall, but the narrow windows that dotted the walls in odd increments and heights allowed beams of purple twilight to fall onto the floor and dance upon the walls. And always, regardless of the daylight hours, light graced the face of Zenthe, shrouded and alone.

Clad only in a sheath of silk as sheer as rain,

Adita knelt before the towering statue, and looked up from lowered eyes, hoping some sign would appear to guide her quest. It was so quiet these days in the temple, too quiet in the lull between festivals with one full company of guards mustered and gone westward, only a day departed, yet it already seemed an eon. In the morning, after Casmin had bade her farewell and the caravan had rolled out of the gates and down the mountain road, Adita had returned to her chamber and heard the daily reports of hardships, of the drought and failed crops. Yes, things had improved, but not enough to give ease and comfort to the people of Corsinium, especially those in the outlands. She ached for them, acutely aware of their waning hope and their faltering faith. And she could not blame them in the least. She carried the failure of the fields upon her shoulders. She was the High Priestess. It was her responsibility to find the answer to the mystery of Zenthe's bliss, of her contentment, and in that languid peace that follows ecstasy, give life energy back to the world.

"Dearest Zenthe, I will not fail you. I will not abandon your children," She whispered, her voice like breath barely beyond her lips.

"Your grace."

Adita started, her gaze quickly focusing on the archway to the right of the dais. Nassa and Coroh

stood there, pressed to each other like children caught in some mischief, their feet carefully outside the perimeter of the chamber, Nassa's arm pressed against the archway's inner wall.

Adita smiled and relaxed, comforted by the nearness of her attendants. "Come, my ladies. I welcome you into Zenthe's chamber."

On quiet, bare feet they glided across the marble floor, two nymphs clad in light, thin cotton tunics that floated on the breeze of their movement. Before the statue they bowed together, as if twins, though they could hardly be more different. Nassa carried her desert heritage in the strong line of her neck and her dark looks. Hair as black as onyx flowed to her waist in a thick curtain and her eyes shone like the golden sands of her homeland. Nassa's beauty held strength and dignity. She was smart and serious, but never turned away from an opportunity to laugh.

Coroh's northern charm and light contrasted with Nassa's darkness and the desert woman's more contemplative nature. Pale blonde, nearly white hair fell in soft waves over her shoulders, framing her sweet oval face and tumbling just beyond the tips of the golden mist that clung to the stiff points of her nipples, teased by the tunic's feather weight. Coroh's sea-blue eyes reflected the effervescence of her personality and often put smiles on Adita's and Nassa's lips.

Adita smiled, her heart swelling as the two of them turned to her. Their compassion and loyalty had created a bond among them that melted the lines between mistress and servant. No, Nassa and Coroh were more than mere chattel; they were Adita's friends.

"Mistress," Nassa whispered, lowering her head reverently to Adita. "We — Coroh and I — we are to take you from the chamber now."

"Yes, mistress. By force if we must, although that might be difficult if you struggle," Coroh chimed in.

Adita stifled a giggle. "Oh really? You would remove the High Priestess from her temple? From the very presence of Zenthe? What would inspire such insolence? Such...blasphemy?"

Coroh glared at Nassa, her whisper loud and harsh, "Blasphemy!? You never said anything about blasphemy."

"Shh!" Nassa commanded, silencing Coroh. "Mistress, we but follow your orders. You instructed us to point out when you have been too long in contemplation. You specifically told Coroh she was to make sure you smiled. Do you remember, Mistress?"

Adita stared at the two of them, overwhelmed with emotion. Like the tickle of an unseen web she remembered staring out her chamber window in the brightening morn, high above the temple road,

watching the dust of the caravan rise from the mountain's lower slopes. Quiet fear hid in her stomach, fear of what Casmin and the others would find at Damtown, and Adita freely admitted, fear that something might happen to her captain. As even the dust faded, a numb hollowness replaced her blood and bone. She had whispered to Coroh and Nassa, standing diligently behind her, "Do not let me fill my days with worry. Help me to keep the darkness from overwhelming me."

Adita smiled at them and took each of their hands. "What do my ladies suggest?"

Coroh grinned, mischief playing in her blue gaze. "I think you need a long massage, then a bath. You must relax, mistress." Coroh and Nassa held onto Adita's hands and gently pulled her toward the archway that led to Adita's private chambers.

"That is very sweet, ladies, but —"

"Mistress, we know you seek the secrets of Zenthe, and we have faith you will find them and heal Corsinium, but how can you find Zenthe's joy if you are not at peace?" Nassa's rich, persuasive voice cooled her like a breeze in summer.

And in the same moment, blew away autumn fog.

She stopped, her mind whirling with Nassa's simple wisdom. Adita's smile grew as seeds

within her memory slowly pushed to the surface. She looked at her two servants, reaching out to caress their cheeks. "Yes, my ladies, I think you're right." Adita turned her wrist and gently stroked their necks with the back of her fingers, a light, delicious descent of promise.

Zenthe's sorrow was not the key, Adita realized. She needed to seek her answer in Zenthe's gifts, the bliss the goddess bestowed upon every man and woman.

Adita stepped between her handmaids, leaning close to Nassa to kiss her full, warm lips. Nassa's tender return triggered a sweet rush of blood to Adita's core. Coroh's hand slipped around Adita's back, her soft, long fingers slowly circling one of Adita's nipples.

Adita sighed, her pulse quickening. She glanced up at the veiled face of Zenthe and smiled.

Yes, she needed to remember the bliss of Zenthe, and Coroh and Nassa would be most happy to assist in her rediscovery.

Chapter 5

The River Bliss was born in the shadow of Zenthe's temple, a narrow, swiftly flowing stream, fed by fountains and vents on the slopes of the mountain, so that steam lay over the water at its source. On his journey west, for the first two days, Casmin saw only the endless rolling hills of the western slope of Zenthe's cratered crest, though they crossed the nameless stream every few hours, where it wound among the tumbled blocks of black stone, or followed a channel in rock so dark the nameless water that would become Bliss flowed like calligrapher's ink.

The road west from the temple had been cut generations before and the recent eruptions had broken it in places and covered stretches of it in thick falls of ash, so that the horsemen sometimes had to stop to clear a path for the four coaches that carried Rivah and a dozen handmaidens, servants, and scribes. Casmin rode an ebon charger, a

splendid beast from the guards' stables, but he had a place in Rivah's coach as well, his first duty to the safety of the priestesses, and also to the pleasure of Zenthe's daughters.

On the night of the second day, they camped, the carriages drawn into a circle on the slope of an ashen foothill, the red sun setting over the lowland forest that stretched to the horizon, a sea of green shadows. Columns of smoke rose in the distance, marking villages that would lie along their path tomorrow, or the next day. Casmin sat on a stool beside a low-burning fire, the cooking done and the fire's heat unwanted in the stillness of the summer night. Rivah sat near him, her beautiful face a pale, thoughtful oval in the darkness. Her servants and Casmin's men had all departed to tend other fires, to feed the horses, and to secure the carriages, so that he and Rivah sat alone in the falling dusk. Rivah had hardly spoken since they left the temple, but she turned to Casmin now, her eyes shining like the stars that had begun to emerge as the sun drowned in the endless sea of the western lowlands.

"How far to Dامتown?" she asked in a hushed tone. "My servant said at least six days."

"Six, perhaps seven, if the road turns bad or we have weather." Casmin poked the fire, raising a shower of sparks that danced between them before dying into the night. He wore the summer

uniform of the guards, a short, open tunic of golden leather that left his legs and most of his chest bare.

Rivah had discarded her priestess' robes for garments more suited to a carriage in the heat of summer. She wore a very short skirt woven of cotton and flax, hardly more than a bar of white across her loins, and a halter that seemed spun of golden mist. The fireglow turned her hair the color of burning coals and her halter as insubstantial as breath so that her breasts seemed all but bare when she leaned toward him.

"So we are both exiles, now," she smiled at him, the curve of her lips almost resolute. "Both sent out to do Zenthe's will. I am glad to have you for company, Casmin."

"And I am honored to serve Zenthe and her First Priestess, and pleased that we share the road."

Rivah rose and came around the fire. Before Casmin could offer his seat, she motioned to him to stay seated and she sat at his feet, her hand resting on his thigh.

"Have you been to Damtown before?"

"Never," he replied. "I have hardly seen the western lands."

"Nor I," she said, and sighed. "I have never wished to see them." She laid her head on his knee, and stared into the languid flames. The

burning fire of her hair ran in hot lines across the skin of his thigh, and Casmin felt every strand like a pulse of promise in his groin. Rivah folded her long, slender legs under her, the white scrap of a skirt riding up, concealing nothing.

Casmin's cock continued to harden and Rivah, as if sensing his arousal in the quickening heat of his thigh, shifted and turned, moving between his legs, her hands on the muscles, fingertips caressing with sharp tenderness.

She licked her lips and her hair shone molten, like a red, smoldering veil that failed to conceal the volcano beyond it. She leaned forward, and with the ease of long practice, Rivah's hands ran under his tunic and freed his cock, rock hard and ready for her attentions.

She crooked the sweetest smile of mischief as she leaned toward him.

Still as midnight shadow, Casmin held his breath deep in his chest as her extended tongue kissed the glistening tip of his prick, curling under and teasing the head. Her breath hotter than the fire's spirit washed him in sweet steam. She bathed him with deep, lingering licks, her tongue expertly caressing every veined inch. The long, slender fingers of her left hand gently cradled his balls, while her right kneaded the tight muscles of his abdomen and stroked down through the tangle of hair to caress his cock, preparing it for

her feast.

Rivah looked up at him, her gaze a whirlwind of passion and dark mischief. Starlight and firelight, promise and worship, her perfect red lips parted in a kiss that engulfed the swollen head. She drove hard, her tongue a constant swirl around and under, expert in her skill. She squeezed his balls and took every inch of his cock into a sheath of wet heat, her breath setting the thick thatch of hair at the base afire.

Her throat constricted and relaxed, sending waves of pleasure shooting through him. Her tongue wrapped with sweet friction, her hands on his ass as she worked, forward and back, fucking him with her open mouth, relentless and hungry with all the goddess' art.

Casmin closed his eyes and saw fire in the veiled skies of night, cascading down the insides of his eyelids, sacred heat in his groin and in his chest, moving with Rivah, flowing out of his loins and into the stiff flesh of his cock, no surface between him and her mouth, just flame, insubstantial and ravenously bright.

His breath blew ragged, in gasps of overwhelmed sensation. Ecstasy stretched to the very edge of tolerance, the pleasure so intense it bordered pain, but Rivah did not relent. She suckled hard, pulling his cock deep into her throat, driving at and under the head with her

magical tongue and lips.

He came, in great, gushing waves of fire, her fingernails furrowing his buttocks forcing him to grind against her as she drank every drop of his seed like a greedy miser. She slowed her assault to sweet licks, bathing the rosy head of his pleasure, lingering at the glans, finding the outermost edge of bliss that still flowed through him, prolonging the moment. She kissed his ravaged cock, her hands tender on his hips, stroking the shrinking flesh with loving reverence.

She looked up at him, her eyes huge and luminous in starlight.

"I am glad you are with me Casmin," she purred as she rose, kissing his chest, his throat, her breath salty and spicy when she pressed her lips to his, slick with his come, her body the embodiment of her goddess. "You will protect me on this journey, and we will stand together in Zenthe's glory."

Casmin took her into his arms, and kissed her perfect lips. He buried his face in the perfumed miracle of her hair, his soul filled with love, with tenderness, and desire, stilled for the moment, but smoldering.

So they passed the second night together, not far from the banks of the stream that would become the River Bliss, twined in praise of Zenthe's grand gifts.

* * * *

Adita stretched across the silk-covered bed, her warm, damp body bare to the gentle summer breeze that blew through tall doors, opening onto a flower-filled balcony. She closed her eyes against the soft, golden glow of dozens of candles burning in small clusters throughout her chamber. Coroh and Nassa had bathed her and dried her with soft cloths, leaving her to comb out her hair while they prepared her chamber. Adita smiled. She'd requested her bed turned down, not the chamber made ready for seduction. Her servants' pouts conveyed their disappointment as she dismissed them for the night and a ribbon of guilt tugged at Adita's soul. Yet, she had not missed the exchanged glances between Coroh and Nassa and her mood sweetened.

Her servants would find their own bliss this night.

Adita's senses whirled with the delicious, earthy musk of the incense lit in the brazier at the center of the chamber. Beyond the walls, night birds called to one another in a rhythm both exotic and erotic. Adita's fingertips rested lightly on her belly, and soon they began a slow sojourn across the plains of her skin. She delighted in the silky caress over her hip, following the curve of her

waist, finding the bridge of her lowest rib and carrying the stroke to the center of her being, then over the passage between her breasts to the hollow of her neck. Light as a feather, but warming rapidly, she savored the combined sensations, letting the pulse of birdcall, the silky heat of her fingers and the musky breath of incense quicken the blood within her veins. Half-lidded eyes held the amber vision of the dancing candle flames; her tongue tipped the edges of her lips. Then the soft pads of her fingers traced the line her tongue had just drawn, the digits dancing at the opening for only a moment before sliding in deliciously, the tip of her tongue playing, teasing the sensitive flesh, sending tiny flames of excitement to gather and burn in her belly.

Her fingers slid into her mouth, then out, mimicking the glorious trek a stiff cock would make. Her tongue lavished its affections, coating the digits, silky and wet. Adita slipped her fingers out one last time, and moved them into the eager cauldron of her sex. Legs spread invitingly; Adita's pussy pulsed in anticipation. Sliding through the curls, her fingertips traced the soft, warm folds. Her eyes closed against the reality of the now, of responsibility and the emptiness of Zenthe's sorrow. Slowly, delicious excitement began to build, each stroke, each foray at the entrance replaced the burdens and the

responsibilities. Squirming on the bed, her free arm stretched over her head, her hand sliding under the stack of pillows to brush the pelt of heaven. She opened her eyes and turned toward the pillows, intrigued beyond measure. Her fingers curled into the exquisite softness and brought the treasure from its hiding place.

Black as shined onyx, Adita marveled at the silky texture of the fur. She examined the unusual piece and grinned as she saw the silk lined opening. A mitt made for sensual pleasure. Adita had used similar ones before, made of rabbit fur or ermine, but none that she had used before felt as sublime as this.

With a widening smile, she slipped the mitt over her hand. Relaxing on the silken sheets, she closed her eyes and began a slow journey over her body, her mind void of everything but the sensation of the creamy fur.

On her forehead, the black fur soothed away the furrows of her worry, each blissful tuft warm and luxurious. The fur fanned her eyelids and thrilled her sensitive lips, pulling them open in the slightest part as small bubbles of anticipation floated towards her middle.

Downward she explored the black fur caressing the hollow of her neck as if a million wisps of clouds cooled her skin, while heating her blood. Her breathing deepened, her pussy, already

prepped by her fingers, slicked further, aching for her touch. She squirmed, her mind filling with the pleasures of the fur. A delighted giggle echoed through the chamber as she thought of the mischief her servants must have had in mind with this little gift.

She circled her breasts, the edges of the soft fur just missing the dark circumference of her nipples as she passed above the sensitive curves, beneath and between them. She bent her knees and her hips began to rise and fall in remembered rhythm as her excitement grew. She took fiendish enjoyment in her self-denial. Her nipples were hard peaks, ready for the flicker of a practiced tongue or caresses by strong hands. She circled her left breast, closing it until the fur began to brush the dark skin of her areola. A growl escaped her lips as a bolt of excitement shot through her body. She closed her hand over her breast, tweaking the nipple through the fur mitt, the sensation one of the most exotic Adita had ever experienced.

Her free hand moved to her pussy, her fingers delving between the damp curls, but with a groan, she pulled her hand away, determined to wait. She turned to her other breast, the same languorous circling, until the fever became unbearable.

Reluctance mixed with excitement as she moved her fur-covered hand down, off her

breasts, over her ribs and across the hard plain of her belly. Her thigh muscles tightened in anticipation, and Adita heard her own whimpers and sighs as her body begged for release.

A thousand kisses pressed against her inner thighs as the exquisite mitt lavished sensation upon her legs. If some eager suitor had been at hand, hard cock ready to penetrate her, she didn't doubt she'd come in an instant. Delirious, she rolled onto her knees, her upper torso flat against the bed. Her round ass tingled with the mitt's caress and Adita knew she could not wait another moment. Her fingers split the folds of her slick pussy and began a merciless rhythm. One finger, then two plunged deep inside, pumping, fast and hard. Her mitted hand kept the rhythm, rubbing in circles over her ass, faster, the enchanting luxuriousness sending Adita's senses reeling. Her breath turned to harsh pants as she raced off the cliff of oblivion. She screamed as she came hard, the muscles of her pussy clamping down on her fingers, the muscles of her legs shaking with the violence of the explosion.

Sinking on to the bed, she struggled to pull even breaths, her inner vision focused on the ecstasy of her self-fulfillment. Bliss. That was Zenthe's gift. That was what must be recaptured. Zenthe's sorrow must be burned away by a cleansing fire.

Soon, please the goddess, soon one lit by the hand of a Consort.

* * * *

The carriage wheels turned with the rhythm of a drunken drummer, regular and steady for a distance, then broken by rocks or ruts so that the passengers held onto their seats or spilled sideways against one another, braced by the heat of their fellows' bodies. Casmin rode in the lead coach, between two handmaidens, facing Rivah and another pair of her servants.

He frankly enjoyed being the only man among five women, each of them lovely as an avatar of the goddess herself, clad in robes of golden silk that parted between firm breasts. His bare legs brushed the smooth heat of theirs in the close car; his upper arms often felt the caress of generous breasts. Late summer warmed the air and the perfume from the women filled the air with sweet, intoxicating musk.

Rivah smiled at him, riding easy now with the steady rhythm of a smooth road, and Casmin returned her smile. Weather had favored their journey and in the lowlands, the horses and oxen moved with a steady gait, so that the caravan made good time on the wide, public road that traced the River Bliss. Through farmlands and

hamlets, Casmin watched the richest part of Corsinium pass beyond the wide windows.

Rivah's eyes sparkled clear and blue as Bliss itself. Casmin openly admired the curving line of her mouth and remembered the pleasure she had given him. She had traded the misty halter and slash of silk across her loins for a robe of gossamer gold, and the shadows of the carriage windows lay upon the folds like long leaves on the floor of an autumn forest, the golden silk clear as sunlight, so that she seemed clothed only in broken bands of darkness that shifted and moved, concealing and revealing.

Her magnificent breasts were bare beneath the robe of sunlight and no shadows gathered there. He struggled to remember she did not ride naked across from him, the tight peaks of her nipples daring him to touch her. But the rules of his order kept his hands in his lap and his cock pressed against the material of his trousers. No soldier dare touch a priestess unless she initiated the contact. Such transgressions ended in execution.

Casmin had seen Rivah fuck four men at once and leave each of them spent and intoxicated, but he also knew she had her moods that were almost chaste and that she might object to him touching her here among her handmaidens. So he rode half erect for much of the journey, stirred by the vision before him and the heat and perfume of the

women all around him. His gaze lingered on Rivah but also on the fields, approaching ripeness for harvest and the river, wide here and shining like a line of diamonds in the sunlight.

The day grew long and the vista unchanging, the endless fields and the rushing river much the same as they rode through the lowlands. The handmaidens dozed and Casmin saw Rivah's eyelids grow heavy until he found the prospect of sleep tempting too, especially with so beautiful a company of dreaming nymphs. The handmaiden on his left, a petite blonde, rested her head against his shoulder as she dozed, her hair kissing his bare arm, her breath warm against his bicep. She dreamed and her lips moved against his skin, her tongue teasing a little, until his cock threatened to burst through his tunic.

Mercifully they reached mid-day and the caravan pulled into a cleared field, where all the passengers disembarked to stretch and eat richly spiced meat and a golden wine that tasted like honey. Casmin drank two glasses and saw Rivah drink until her eyes shone warm with mischief when she met his gaze.

Here, the River Bliss widened, its waters swift from their fall down the mountainside, the music of the flow a muted roar of motion and life. Casmin sat on the bank and bathed his feet in the cool waters. He heard the sound of the goddess in

the current's choir, singing a litany of growth and life. He cherished again his role in serving her, the power of generation and the joy of eternal renewal. He wanted to bathe in the rushing waters, preferably with Rivah, to feel the chill, life-bestowing liquid upon his entire body and then to thrust deep into her pussy, a blaze flashing in the cool air counterpoint to the water, his cock a shaft of molten steel to flow into her cunt, to be released and complete.

His fantasy evaporated when disappointment tainted the moment. The drover's cry left no room for dalliances. "Mount up! All board!" He found his way back to the carriage where he would ride the rest of the day unto the evening. Again, pressed between the little blonde and her darker sister, he faced Rivah, flanked by two raven-haired beauties. She regarded Casmin with eyes that sparkled and gleamed like winter ice.

The team started forward and the carriage shifted, throwing the women against him, so that Casmin laughed and put an arm around each of the two who rode beside him, careful to take no liberty in touching the girls, enough only to steady them and insure their comfort.

They rode so for a time before Casmin noticed Rivah's narrow gaze. She smiled, mischief at the corners of her mouth as she glanced down at his crotch. He felt the weight of her appraisal as

surely as though she had used her mouth on him. He stirred visibly beneath his tunic, unable to resist the magic of the women.

"Would you fuck me, Casmin? Here among my maidens? Do you want them too?" She purred, amusement laced with arousal turning her words teasingly sweet.

"My pleasure is Zenthe's bidding," Casmin answered, his heart quickening.

"It will be a game, Captain. I promise you the best ride you've ever had, but first you must make each of my sisters come. I want to hear their cries before I give you what you wish. And believe me, my sweet champion, it will be as you have never had it before."

As Rivah spoke, she shifted forward in her seat and her silken robe whispered down her ivory shoulders, clinging for a moment to the full, red tips of her breasts, then caressing her thighs as she spread her knees and opened to him.

Casmin held his breath. Pleasing the four priestesses would both drain him and take time, and in that time, Rivah might change her mind as to rewarding him and more than anything, he wanted very much to sink his cock into her pussy, to let her fuck him until blind. An idea struck him, divinely sent he didn't doubt. He smiled and answered Rivah in a low, husky voice of promise.

"I will make them come, Rivah, so that their

voices sing to us in our play, all of them at the same moment, like a chorus."

Rivah tilted her head, one graceful auburn brow arched, intrigued. She pushed herself up from the seat for a moment, so that her robe pooled under her, spilling onto the floor. She faced him, entirely naked, her tongue playing on her lips, her eyes measuring him, accepting his challenge.

He had fucked Rivah many times over the years, their relationship one built solely on her terms. He never tired of the symmetry of her form, the responsive little nipples high on firm, arching breasts, the tapering line of her stomach and the swell of her hips. A line of silken red pointed to the open flower of her sex.

The carriage bounced and pitched, but Casmin moved with smooth assurance, bending in his seat to unlace his right sandal, pausing to stroke the calf of the brunette beauty on his right. He kicked his shoe back beneath the seat and brought his hand up the girl's leg, his fingers tracing a line along her thigh, gathering her robe over his wrist, hand spreading hard, fingertips barely brushing the edge of her pussy.

Then he bent and untied his left sandal, and his hands explored the legs of the blonde girl freely and tenderly. Both of the women shifted in their seats, opening their robes, spreading their legs for

him, the scent of their cunts turning the sweet perfume in the carriage into passion's scent.

Rivah watched him, her hand resting on the lips of her pussy, her breath matching Casmin's own, their eyes locked when he sat back upright.

Casmin turned to the blonde on his left and he kissed her, long and full, his tongue and hers in desperate duel, his fingers insistent at the downy, damp cleft.

She began to pant, and Casmin heard Rivah and the other girls utter little sounds of excitement, but he did not linger with the blonde. Even as he turned to the brunette maiden on his right, he raised his right foot, still cool from the river's waters, and ran his toes firmly up the leg of the black-haired twin on Rivah's left. His foot still felt alive with the kiss of Bliss's flow and his toe proved remarkably agile in its assault, his calf caressing her thigh as he worked his toes into her pussy in a slow, insistent thrust. At the same time, he pulled the brunette to him, kissing her hard enough to bruise, the carriage suddenly rough in its journey, so they bounced and jostled.

Inspiration and heat filled him as his right hand found purchase in a nest of dark curls, his well-trained fingers sliding around her clit and then deep into her wet hole. Supporting himself with the powerful muscles of his lower back, Casmin arched and raised his bare, left foot into the lap of

the other woman across from him, pushing aside her robe. Dexterous strokes split her pussy as he divided her with his toe.

His hands and toes synchronized with the shared, harsh whisper of their breathing. In and out of the women, thumb and great toe at the buds of the precious blooms of their clits, his fingers and toes thrust and stroked and Casmin marveled at the power of his own arousal.

He struggled to remain focused, knowing well that each flower in Zenthe's garden had its own needs, that some enjoyed deep penetration while others treasured the gardener's kiss upon the bud. His challenge, to please four flowers at once, to sense the touch that most pleased each of them, blinded his vision, yet seemed to be as transparent as glass. He found the movements natural, instinctive, as though he and the four women shared a single set of nerves, a single heartbeat, the pulse in his rigid cock beat with the thrust of his fingers and the probe of his toes in the sweet twin pussies of the black-haired goddesses across from him.

Wherever his skin touched theirs, fire bloomed. He ran his foot up the belly of the women, heels against the open flowers, then down again, toes working deep and dripping.

The blonde began to cry out first, thrusting herself hard against Casmin's hand, gripping him

with the velvet steel of her thighs, but he hardly had time to note her response before the brunette uttered a low moan and began to buck against his right hand.

Then the black-haired twins, like a single dancer in a mirror, arched and writhed against his feet, framing Rivah, who breathed with them, her eyes like depthless lakes.

Casmin thrust upward and Rivah reached across and opened his tunic so that the bare shaft of his cock emerged, aching to touch any of the women, to seek blind release in any of them, all of them.

His breath eased for a moment, the smell of musk so much stronger in the carriage, his hands and feet anointed with the flowing essence of the women, the carriage's passage suddenly smoother, as though it eased with the flood of shared release.

His foot trailed down the sticky thigh of a black-haired maiden and he growled as Rivah rose, letting the forward motion of the carriage carry her, so that she turned in the space between them and sat in his lap, the hard pillar of his cock lying along the cleft of her pussy, but not within her.

She rocked on him, caressing his thighs with her hands, rubbing the smooth round pillow of her butt against him, leaning forward to run

herself along the length of his member, once, twice, then the carriage motion lifted her again and she sat back down, impaling herself on him, crushing him inside her with a deep, rolling embrace.

She pulled up and Casmin tried to rise with her, but the women beside him held his back, their hands under his tunic, on his shoulders and his thighs, kissing his neck and face, their breasts firm and hot against him.

Rivah lowered herself again, taking all of him in and rolling him in heat, Zenthe's soul as surely as the chill waters of the Bliss, waves of fire down his cock, rising up in his stomach and back. He tried again to rise with her, but she pulled away, even as the blonde held him, licking along his neck, and the brunette, her mouth a hot circle of sensation on his breast.

Across from him, the raven-haired twins embraced their priestess, supporting her as she rose, kissing her, reveling in her ecstasy. Rivah lowered herself again, the girls moving with her so that they rested against Casmin's legs, their hands roaming between Rivah and him, no difference in the flesh or the flame.

She engulfed his cock in tight, obliterating pleasure, a sensation he felt at the base of his skull, blinding and convulsing, the slow roll of her perfect control almost too much to bear, and this

time she stayed down, grinding against him, pulling him deeper into her, then rising, only to come down harder, the walls of fire absolute in their white heat.

The brunette bit his chest as Rivah began to moan, a song of praise to her goddess, Casmin thought, who certainly deserved it. He thrust with her, deeper still, and she cried out and he felt the flower close hard upon his cock as waves of pleasure swept through her, through him, out of him and into her in endless eruption.

The hands of the maidens stroked his chest and arms, as Rivah rose, disengaging from his shrinking cock and turning to face him, settling into his lap again, straddling his thighs. She reached down and took his shaft in her hand, laying its red length along the line of her pussy so the line of fiery hair tickled the glistening tip.

"We still have a long way to go, captain," Rivah said, stroking him. "However shall we pass the time?"

* * * *

For Adita, in her alabaster temple on the rim of Zenthe's cauldron, the days passed quickly, as if she slid down a waterfall. The sweet summer sun stretched into the heavens to kiss the world with warmth and light. The daily blessings of the High

Priestess filled her hours as the harvest tithes began to arrive from the provinces. Adita did her best to hide her growing concerns as the bags of grain, bushels of fruit, and herds of stock animals were presented in the courtyard after the midday meal. The tithes were staggeringly low, and while the tithing would continue through the week, traditional tithes offered by favored provinces were conspicuously absent.

Adita could not speak her fears, but Kai voiced what echoed in her heart.

“Kahmudjans.”

The reserves at the temple began to run low. Too many years of desolation, too many failed harvests. The provinces scraped and sacrificed to give even this much to the temple. The priestesses would not starve, and perhaps the next year would see a return of Zenthe’s blessings to the orchards and fields.

Adita rose, the soft, warm breeze kissed her skin chastely. She lifted her voice above the hushing crowd, all eyes fixed on her as she raised her arms toward the sky.

“Children of Zenthe, for time untold you have brought your bounty to this temple, given fattened livestock, and the produce of your fields and orchards, in times when our goddess smiled upon the land, and even now, when she has been consumed by her grief, that her blessings are

lessened and your crops and herds are diminished.

“You who remain faithful, who bring to Zenthe the blood of your land will not be forgotten by her or by me. But I will not take more than what the temple needs. What you have brought here for Zenthe’s stores, take half of it back to your lands, and give it to those in need. Zenthe’s sorrow cannot be cured by the cries of a hungry babe or a starving widow. Zenthe is honored by your generosity and faith; now live up to her faith in you; tend to your people.”

Only the breeze whispered, the silence of the crowd that filled the courtyard pregnant with surprise and gratitude. Adita lowered her hands, and her head, her voice quiet as she finished.

“May Zenthe bless you all.”

She turned from the crowd and walked slowly back into the temple, tears streaming down her face as the voices behind her lifted in riotous cheers, then coalesced into a hymn of joyful praise to Zenthe.

As she undressed and bathed, the cheering outside turn to songs, and she knew that Zenthe would work her magic among the pilgrims, and the returned bounty would be celebrated with unions of joy and abandon.

The mountain would ring with the songs of ecstasy.

Praise to Zenthe.

* * * *

Adita stood at her desk wrapped in a towel, her freshly combed hair still slick down her back. In the bathing chamber she heard Coroh and Nassa cleaning up, their soft giggles a gift against the worry that tugged the High Priestess's mind. She lifted a parchment from the desk and stared at the stock report Kai had delivered. She tried to estimate how much more would be needed before the winter and whether there would be anything left over to rebuild the reserve that had already been spent.

She saw how close to hunger they lived now.

Adita set the report down and walked toward her bed, far on the other side of the chamber. The day had been long and the night had grown loud and wild as the priestesses saw to the comfort and entertainment of the tithe representatives.

Zenthe would provide.

And she must be worshipped properly.

Adita dropped the towel at her feet, and fell lightly onto the silk-covered mattress, giving herself to the goddess. She loved the sensation of silk against warm skin — whether sun, fire, or water-warmed. She closed her eyes, a small smile stretching across her lips as her fingers lightly

danced between her breasts, teasing her right nipple with a close encounter.

She stretched both arms high over her head, sliding them under the mountain of pillows piled against the headboard.

There her fingers caressed something unexpected, soft and luxurious. Her attention piqued, she turned her head and opened her eyes, as she pulled a velvet bag from under the pillows.

Not the mitt this time.

Thick, sea-blue velvet fabric held something heavy within. Silk cords drew the bag closed, and as she lifted it, the deep sound of heavy clinking reaching her ears. Adita grinned, knowing.

"You found our toys, mistress," Nassa called from the doorway.

Adita laughed joyfully. "You minxes."

She opened the bag and emptied the contents onto the bed. Smooth as oiled glass, two phalluses fell against the silk sheets. Beautifully carved, one of rich jade, the other of agate, they shone in the candlelight, winking mischievously in the shadow-play of Nassa and Coroh's approach.

Adita took the phalluses in hand and held them to her servants. "What did you have planned for these, my dears?"

Coroh giggled. "If we told you, where would be the surprise?"

Smooth strong hands took Adita's shoulders,

stroking down, fingertips light and warm. Nassa took the phalluses from Adita, laying them on the pillows. Slowly, the two servants gently reclined their mistress onto the bed, their hands never ceasing in their exploration of her arms and shoulders. Coroh pulled away long enough to shed the thin sarong she wore. Bare, she knelt upon the bed, her gaze like blue fire upon Adita's body. The beautiful blonde traced a line up Adita's thigh, traversing the path between her breasts, to dance upon her collarbone. Adita smiled at her, reaching up to stroke her face, a gentle pressure calling Coroh to her lips.

The girl tasted good, like summer berries and spice. Her kiss was tender, but quickly turned urgent as a fire roared to life within Adita's soul. Their tongues tangled and Adita's hand curled in Coroh's hair, her back arching to meet the delicious feast of her handmaiden's lips.

Hands kneaded and stroked. A sudden flash of lightning shot through Adita as another pair of lips closed over her right nipple, teeth gently raking, a suckling so perfect Adita gasped against Coroh's mouth.

Nassa, sweet Nassa.

Adita squirmed, reveling in the attentions of her servants. Her pussy pulsed, aching, eager for its due, and Adita was not disappointed as Nassa's fingers slid between her curls and began

coaxing the folds. Adita groaned in delight, her hips rolling against the rhythm. Nassa's fingers played beautifully, tracing every tender line, teasing the opening, darting in just enough to elicit another plaintive whimper from Adita.

Nassa chuckled, heavy with passion, her mouth full of Adita's breast.

Adita arched, her arms outstretched, her tongue still playing with Coroh's. Cool, smooth, her fingers found one of the phalluses, and a tickle of delight added to Adita's mounting pleasure.

She reached down, trailing the phallus tip along Coroh's stomach until she felt the juncture of the sweet blonde's legs. Coroh began to break the kiss, but Adita pushed her tongue deep into her servant's mouth, flickering, darting, promising. Coroh hesitated and Adita slipped the phallus between the outer lips of the girl's pussy, rhythm intent, massaging the clit, coating the smooth stone cock.

Coroh sighed, her lips still locked to Adita's, her hand now stroking the breast left unattended by Nassa, loving the nipple, gently kneading the flesh.

Nassa's fingers slid into Adita, deep, then withdrew, a slow rhythm in the making. Adita groaned, her excitement mounting. Adita continued her gentle teasing of Coroh, the blonde's hips moving against the agate cock and

Adita's hand.

Adita longed for the oblivion her ladies worked to provide. It had been so long since her attendants or priestesses had touched her in so intimate a way. Some High Priestesses barely went a day without the bliss of sexual release, and Adita didn't know exactly why she had denied herself as she had. It was not forbidden for a High Priestess to be pleased by her priestesses or female servants. As a Priestess, Adita had enjoyed the pleasures of her sisters often, but when she took the oath, something changed, something Adita could not name, but felt in her soul.

She was not just a woman, a body to be pleased. She was Zenthe's voice and body on earth, and Zenthe did not want just blinding ecstasy.

Zenthe also wanted someone to please.

Adita curled her fingers around the phallus, gripping the flat end with purpose. She slipped the bulbous head along Coroh's pussy, the head sliding easily to the opening as if with sentient will. Adita did not hesitate, but thrust the cock into Coroh's wet, waiting cunt.

Coroh broke the kiss with a quiet shriek of delight, her head going back as Adita almost withdrew the agate cock, then plunged it deep again, tight into Coroh's pussy.

"Nassa, help me," Adita groaned as ripples of

pleasure raced through her sex.

Nassa released Adita's breast, her golden eyes afire with lust. She hesitated a moment, then pulled her dripping fingers from Adita, and clambered over to Coroh.

Coroh looked at Nassa as if betrayed.

"Nassa, what are you doing?"

Nassa's grin was beyond devilish. "Obeying my Mistress, Coroh. To do otherwise would be wrong."

Nassa's throaty laughter failed to cover Coroh's mild protests. Adita grinned as she moved to the side, her gaze directing Nassa to Coroh's breast opposite Adita.

As Adita closed her lips over Coroh's nipple, she slowly continued to slide the agate cock in and out of the blonde's pussy and Nassa's fingers quickly began exploring the outer folds.

Soon, Coroh's panting filled the chamber, announcing her approach to climax. Adita continued thrusting the phallus, her pace increasing steadily, delighting in the writhing blonde beneath her mouth.

Coroh screamed, her body shuddering violently. Nassa pulled at her nipple, her grin made more comical as she quickly released Coroh's flesh, the perky breast snapping back, the tip swollen and wet with attention.

Adita slowed her thrusts, but did not stop,

keeping the cock deep within Coroh. The girl squirmed and smiled, her breathing slowly returning to normal.

Adita grinned down at her. "Better?"

Coroh just nodded, smiling, her hips slowly stirring against Adita's continuous assault.

Adita looked at Nassa, her own mischief taking hold.

"Shall we see if we can exhaust her?"

Nassa nodded enthusiastically, moving toward Coroh's pussy, the golden gaze that of unbridled hunger.

"Wait a moment, Nassa, not so fast," Adita chirped. "We must give Coroh a fighting chance." Adita looked at Nassa's hips then nodded towards Coroh's head.

Coroh's grin then matched Nassa's, "Yes, Mistress. It would be only right."

Fire filled Nassa's eyes as she carefully straddled Coroh, her black-curled pussy open and glistening with dampness.

The servants did not hesitate, each putting their tongues and lips to the other, the sounds of delight soon filling the chamber. Adita watched them, seeing her two trusted handmaidens as she never had before; not as menials or even as friends, but as equals — women, with desires and passion, joy and spirit. Adita had always known Nassa and Coroh were not just servants and she'd never

treated them cruelly or without thought, but seeing the two pleasing each other, lips and tongues working the folds of the other's pussy, flickering at clits and darting in and out, they opened their souls to Adita. Their whimpers and cries rolled over her skin, enflaming her desire, her pussy, already slick, pulsing with want to be fucked.

Adita reached out, and stroked her ladies, cupping Coroh's breast as she writhed beneath Nassa, and reaching over Nassa's back to play with the raven-haired beauty's nipple. New tenor was given to the moans of delight, and Adita thrilled that she added to their enjoyment.

She wanted more.

Adita found the other phallus, the polished jade shining in the candlelight. The agate, removed by Nassa before she started devouring Coroh's pussy, lay on the silk, glistening still, coated in Coroh's juices. Taking it in hand, Adita kneeled, her knees at Coroh's ribs, and trailed the jade cock down Nassa's back, over the sweet curve of her ass, down the back of her muscled thigh, showing Coroh the cock and nodding her intentions. Coroh's mouth, busy lapping at Nassa's pussy, shifted, giving Adita access.

Adita rested the jade cock at the opening, letting Nassa's own squirming ease the thick head just beyond the threshold. Coated with the sweet

juice of the serving girl's rising pleasure, Adita slowly pushed the cock into her.

Nassa arched, gasping, her mouth leaving Coroh's pussy in a howl of pleasure. Slowly, her thrusts measured and angled precisely, the jade cock filling Nassa, sliding easily in and out. As Nassa panted, her mouth hovering over Coroh's pussy, Adita carefully placed the agate cock against Coroh's freed slit, and slid the already slick stone into the writhing blonde even as her other hand thrust the jade into Nassa.

Twin cries of pleasure rose to the ceiling. Mindful of Nassa and Coroh's undulating hips and eager lips, Adita set the rhythm, thrusting the cocks into the women at the same time. She inhaled the intoxicating musk of her ladies' bliss and gave herself over to the fragrance. Adita began building, the thrusting becoming faster, deeper, her fingers soon bathed in the juices of the lavish, twin feasting. Adita's own cunt, well oiled with desire, wanted to be stroked, filled, fucked. She pressed against the women, her hips sliding against their sides with the rhythm she set with the stone cocks. Adita panted with them, small groans and whimpers escaped her throat as Coroh and Nassa began to growl and buck. Sweat trickled down between Adita's breasts, her stomach rubbed against her ladies, oiled with their mingled perspiration. Dark splotches patched the

silk sheets.

Still faster, the stone cocks hammering into Nassa and Coroh under Adita's power, tongues lapping, the sound of groaning and suckling almost masking the high-pitched cry that penetrated the frenzy.

Nassa sang out, her usually sedate tones replaced by a scream of complete ecstasy, and Coroh's song soon joined it.

Adita pumped the phalluses deep into them, then three perfect, prolonged slides, twisting the cocks just a little at the end, and hard shudders overwhelmed both women. Howls, squeals, the rhythm of their hips completely unmanageable, the women came together, panting and murmuring against each other's pussy, Nassa's legs shaking with the force of the matched orgasms.

Adita held the cocks, sweetly twisting them inside until both women did nothing but sigh and tremble. Nassa collapsed on Coroh, and Coroh's arms circled the dark haired woman for a moment, then fell limp against the soaked sheets.

She withdrew the cocks carefully, her breath barely filling her lungs. She wanted so much to shove one or both of them into her own overheated pussy, but instead she set them on the sheets, freeing her hands to stroke her ladies' hair. She smiled as she rested back on her heels, staring

at the two women, her mind filled with desire, but also with understanding.

Nassa smiled at Adita, her face perfect, sated and relaxed. "Now, mistress, let us give you pleasure."

A bolt of electricity shot through Adita, straight to her slick pussy. She had no doubt her ladies could please her beyond words, and with temptation sweet upon her tongue, Adita slowly shook her head.

"Oh my dears, you have given me great pleasure, and more importantly, great understanding. I very much want to play, want to feel your lips and tongues all over me, want your hands upon those beautiful toys as you use them on me. I want that all, as does Zenthe, but it is not our time, not yet." Adita leaned over and kissed Nassa on the head, then moved over and kissed Coroh on the forehead.

"But it will be, my dears. It will be soon. You have given to me the gift of remembering what it is like to give pleasure to another selflessly, and what it is to know the thrill of desire without the pressure of failure. I know you don't understand, my dear, sweet ladies, but you have given to me a great gift."

Adita moved off the bed, looking at her two ladies, love for them filling her soul. "Stay, relax," Adita grinned. "Play some more. I will be at the

Cup.”

Adita slipped quietly across the cool marble floor of her chamber. She took her robe as she slipped out the door and into the night.

So ready to meet Zenthe’s will, whatever it might be.

* * * *

Casmin passed his journey west most pleasantly in the company of Rivah and her servants. Each long day’s journey brought new delights as he explored the frontiers of pleasure in the narrow confines of the coach. One entire day was passed with Casmin tasting each of the girls’ sweet pussies in delicious turn, with Rivah acting as a kind of timekeeper, telling him when to finish each delightful meal. The next day, the girls returned the favor and Casmin came four times, each harder and more intense than the time before, each lick and suckle on his cock a testament to the exquisite talents of Zenthe’s priestesses.

One of the black-haired handmaidens, whose name was Delitte, was particularly adept with her lips and tongue, and she held Casmin’s cock in her mouth for nearly an hour, after he had already come three times. She slowly suckled him, the hot friction of her teeth and palette lovingly cradling

him as she teased the sensitive head, gently at first, then more insistently until even a noodle would have stiffened and swollen.

Rivah's eyes shone with fierce pleasure when Casmin squirmed in the carriage seat and his lips turned upward in a crazed smile. She pushed Delitte aside and the black-haired girl could not stifle a sigh of disappointment when Rivah took her place. The First Priestess' mouth knew Casmin's cock well and she took him in to the hilt, letting her teeth just massage the most tender places as she passed over them. Casmin had been drained almost a dozen times in four days and though he had been suckled dry three times already that day, Delitte's talented lips had brought him erect again.

Now Rivah would finish the job, but like their complex relationship, she would be in control. In places, his shaft was scraped almost raw from the sweet friction of so much fucking, and Rivah was merciful, her tongue as gentle as a whisper, and as insistent as a plea. Heat and motion blazed a trail of sensation all the way from his backbone to the base of his skull. Waves of amazing pleasure coursed through him as she pulled his prick in and out of lips red as strawberries. The girls flanking him stroked and kissed his arms and chest until all he felt was the mouths and hands of women, all he smelled was the musk and perfume

of their bodies, and all he heard was their laughter and sweet sighs.

Head back on the carriage seat, Casmin thrashed and glanced out the carriage window at the passing land. For a moment, his senses registered a dancing blue light, as though the world had turned to aquamarine, then Rivah suckled a little harder, reclaiming his full attention, and she pumped him steadily, in and out, between the pillows of her sweet mouth, lips full as sunrise, her tongue undeniable in its thirst.

Casmin came again, the blue light suddenly everywhere, filling the carriage, turning the golden flesh of the ladies to pearl, and the azure and the gold and the pale perfection of their skin became the very colors of ecstasy.

He closed his eyes enjoying every second of the orgasm, until she released his cock with a final, promising kiss on the worn red head. She chuckled softly as she took to her seat across from him.

“Still sweet, my love.” Rivah’s triumphant smile crumbled as Delitte turned her attentions away from Casmin to Rivah’s exposed swollen breasts. The black-haired priestess eagerly suckled at Rivah’s nipples and soon, another of the priestesses moved to between Rivah’s legs. She kissed up Rivah’s thighs until all Casmin saw was the back of her head moving and all he heard were

Rivah's sighs of pleasure. Transfixed, Casmin watched the priestesses please Rivah with mouth and fingers moving in and out of Rivah's pussy. They stroked her clit and teased her ass until Rivah's moan's filled the carriage.

Casmin could hardly believe it when he felt the stirrings of life in his cock as he watched the women relentlessly pleasure Rivah. The fire-haired priestess came at least twice before the four underlings began to break away.

As the priestesses settled back into place, Casmin regained his breath. Slowly, his mind returned to his duty. He now understood the blue light and understood its significance. The caravan traversed a wide paved path along a cliff edge. The dancing beacon of ecstasy shone in bright reflection from the surface of the vast lake that lay just south of the roadway. Focusing his gaze, he saw where the path wound behind the carriage. The caravan looked like a long snake above the dark stone of the cliff, catching the blue rays of the mirror lake that shined in the glass of carriage windows and on the armor of marching and mounted soldiers.

Lake Sorrow, Casmin thought, so poorly named now, for all its beauty, yet so the lake had been called for many generations. Legend said it had once been called Lake Bliss, but in an age when Zenthe had been loveless for too long, the name

had been changed by official decree when Tolocia, one of the most tragic high priestesses of the order, had commanded the change after she suffered the loss of her third suitor.

Someday, Casmin mused, the name will be restored to Bliss, in celebration.

Sorrow had never been so beautiful, he thought, leaning across the priestess on his right, trying to thrust his head out the window. She giggled and made way for him, sliding sideways on the seat to allow him access to the window. He knew Lake Sorrow from maps, and the day shone so clear and bright that he could see the shape of the enormous basin, where it stretched east and west. Beside the path ahead, winding around the highlands, Casmin saw the first houses at the edge of Damtown. The caravan would arrive soon; the lead riders were likely already in the hamlet.

In his mind's eye, Casmin saw the dam. Looking north, across the shining majesty of Sorrow, he knew of a narrow place where the dam would rise above the glistening surface. This is the source of water that gives life to the western desert when the years are good, Casmin thought. This is the source of pure bounty; and the font of so much anger and misery when the years are bad.

Casmin watched the surface of Sorrow, the sunlight dancing upon the rippling surface like the gleam of diamonds.

This is the blessing of Zenthe, and her curse.

Chapter 6

The main road rose sharply at the outskirts of Damtown, the wagons and carriages raising thick clouds of dust in the afternoon heat. Casmin rode his charger, pacing the carts at the forefront of the caravan, riding diligently along the line, his golden tunic and vest of shining leather, plated with crescents of thin, gilt tin, the ceremonial garb of caution. The closer they came to the desert, the greater the risk of combat and Casmin, who had been well-trained with a sword, understood that his skill at arms was mostly untried, for he had rarely ever had cause to raise his weapons in anger. His heart quickened and he consciously controlled his breathing as he sat his charger in a posture of sure authority, tapping memory and relying on endless hours of repetitious training to serve him should trouble present itself.

Casmin's scouts were already in the town, riding ahead of the wagons, and a messenger had

already brought tidings that Damtown was filled with armed men, blue-robed Kahmudjans, who bore spears and flails and seemed eager to fight. So far, the messenger said, no blood had been spilled, but neither did Zenthe's soldiers make any attempt to leave the market courtyard where the wagons would unload.

Now he kept two guards near him and another half dozen rode among the carriages and carts, but by now the main wagons would have arrived in town, might already be surrounded by Kahmudjans. Casmin had made a tactical error, underestimating his foe, and he now had two choices. He could halt the caravan and call his soldiers back — assuming the messenger reached them — or he could go forward, trusting in Zenthe to ensure his guards victory, but risking the caravan.

He made his decision, rode beside the priestess' coach, and leaned down to the window. "My lady," he called out and Rivah leaned out to hear him. The rising dust made a veil between them as he kept his words calm and direct. "I do not know what we will find in the town. The worshippers of Kahmudj are waiting with arms. We must proceed without fear or hesitation."

"As you say, Captain." Rivah gave him grace with her nod, accepting his plan. He felt the fate of the priestess and her handmaidens heavy on his

pounding heart. The Kahmudjans had no love for Zenthe's women, and less for her soldiers.

Casmin rode to the head of the carriages, summoning with a wave the nine stalwarts who rode with him, eight men in thin gold armor and one dark-clad messenger, Elena, desert bred, a woman with skin the color of beer and hair as black as sable. She moved with remarkable grace and Casmin knew that, of all his soldiers, she might well be the most dangerous — the one who would die with the most bodies at her feet.

Hovels and long, oaken warehouses pocked the roadside and the stink of the city rose up in his face. Boldly, he led the caravan into the city, up the winding road, his gaze casual at surly knots of staring men and women alongside the road. Above the hovels rose walls and sudden towers, the ancient homes of the merchant princes of Damtown, like giant mushrooms along the River Sorrow, lining the pathway to the dam, somewhere unseen to the north. Casmin realized as they penetrated the squalid tangle of wood and stone, how large Damtown was and how old.

The caravan bloomed suddenly, like a colorful flower from the stem of an alleyway, spreading out into the great marketplace, holding its line even in the press of vendors, servants, and citizens. Stalls and little carts of farmers and potters, the cordoned courts of the merchant

princes with yards of brightly hued flagstone larger than a rich man's field, and little palaces where anything might be bought or sold formed a mosaic of class and standing within the city center. Sharp-eyed men with the souls of ravens clustered around the slowing wagons.

Casmin saw his enemy at once.

Like the sky come down to earth, the blue robes of the Kahmudjans marked a line, behind the buyers and sellers of Damtown, each of them armed, many with good weapons.

The other Zenthe soldiers, a small army of golden standards and cloaks, approached through the crowd, a small company of forty horsemen and a half dozen scouts and messengers, most of them still mounted, their horses restless and uncertain in the press of the market. A corporal and the quartermaster had dismounted to argue with a stableman, and another pair of soldiers stood stiffly, eye-to-eye with four men who might have been their brothers, though clad in robes of blue.

Casmin formed up his personal guard and joined the soldiers and the wagons and coaches slowly followed.

The stink of the city, horses and men, and dust, clogged his nose, but it was the hatred in the air, the breathing beast readying itself to kill that tried to steal his breath. He inhaled deeply, as if daring

the dark tide to take him, but as he exhaled, he confidently knew such hatred did not breathe in him. A strange calm and certainty filled him as he assessed the number of blue robes. Perhaps a hundred, men and women, some of them capable, but many untrained, more nuisance than menace.

He guessed that more of the Kahmudjans stood behind the rank of thieves and merchants, concealing their numbers until they were sure of Zenthe's ranks. Casmin rode easily to where his corporal and the blue robe circled each other with their eyes, drawn daggers in the whites of their bared teeth. He dismounted at his corporal's shoulder.

"Stand to, Corporal," he said, patting the rigid soldier on the shoulder. He then turned and grinned at the Kahmudjan. "Zenthe's greetings, gentleman. We are here to open her gate."

To Casmin's surprise, the blue robe nodded, his predatory scowl turning to a malicious grin. He pointed to the wide road that led north, out of the market. "Yes, we know. My lord, Sul Tarkus, awaits you there."

Casmin did not hesitate, but remounted his charger. He raised his arm and a standard bearer rode fast to his side, the banner of Zenthe flying high above them like lines of golden fire in the still summer air. The soldiers fell in around him, forming three parallel columns, their mount's

restless snorting louder than the hush of the assembled crowd, silent in anticipation of bloodshed. The corporal mounted, but Casmin called down to the quartermaster, "Arrange for our lodging and feeding — a stable for our horses. We will return before sunset."

Four of his men appeared from the direction of the carriages, Rivah and her attendants walking beside them, heads high, shoulders back. The priestesses had almost concealed their nakedness with golden robes that would have been modest, had the fabric not been thin as water. The shining silk clung to them and made golden nude sculptures of their bodies, sharp contrast to the modest women of Damtown and the heavy blue robes of the Kahmudjan handmaidens.

The tension of the crowd at the sight of the priestesses, the mix of reverence and lust that the women inspired wherever they appeared, washed over Casmin, even as the breathless sense of impending violence took on new life, mingled with the promise of sex. Defend Zenthe, he reminded himself, for these women are her daughters and hold her essence between their thighs.

"Priestess," he called to Rivah. "You will ride with me. Your sisters will ride with my men. Let the servants and scribes remain with the train, but we will not leave you here."

He reached down for Rivah's hand and lifted her before him, her golden robe gathered at the edge of modesty. From her vantage she looked on the crowd with a gaze both imperious and warm with promise. Casmin marveled at her beauty and that of her sisters, each of them channeling Zenthe's magic, anticipating her advent, radiant with the life-giving flow of the river, the opening of the gates of fertility to all the western lands, but more powerful still, the vision of pleasure they would bestow on those favored by their desire.

Casmin knew when the priestesses of Zenthe came to Damtown, they brought the hope of ecstasy and abandon, orgiastic rituals a thousand years old, license for wine and long nights of fucking. Over the fortnight of ceremony that followed the gate's opening, each priestess might take a hundred lovers and the women of Damtown would be open to the gifts of Zenthe, so that the boundaries of marriage might melt away and chaste girls awaken to the hidden song of their desire.

Now each of the priestesses found a mount and rode gripped in the arms of a golden-armored soldier. Fearlessness radiated from them, but the power they exuded did not come from the protector they rode with, but in their own allure. As the guards rode to the head of the column, Casmin again assessed the blue robes' numbers.

They moved like slow, bright shadows within the crowd and their numbers had seemingly doubled.

Casmin and Rivah took their place at the front of the columns and led the troops through the press of bodies and carts. As the crowd parted, they passed knots of the Kahmudjan priests and warriors, desert men, men like the Hawk and his soldiers who had died in Zenthe's wrath years before. Women of the plains, their red-hair, long waists, and skill with bows making them legendary throughout Corsinium, were common in the ranks of the Kahmudjans, their sharp eyes wary and the blue flow of their robes perhaps concealing weapons. Casmin marveled at the mix of farm folk and city people, river men and a small cluster of strange, waxy figures that seemed to move as one, strangers from some land so distant Casmin had never seen their kin. As he pushed through the rich stink of the crowd, the ripeness of grain baking in the sun, horses, sweat, fear, Casmin noted the faces of the men and women of Damtown, the merchants and urchins of the city, shopkeepers' wives and tax collectors.

He saw reverence and fear, but other things as well — resentment, anger, even hatred.

Then Casmin knew, Zenthe would be tested in this sacred place of power, perhaps as she had never been tested before.

* * * *

Rivah watched the men and women of Damtown from within the circle of Casmin's arms and thrilled as fortune's grimly playful hands stroked her spine. Most of the crowd kept their distance, disbelief and curiosity strange companions in their gazes. Rivah kept her back straight, her shoulders square, head high, and while her posture was the rigid, ritual stance of a First Priestess, her smile was genuine. It had been years since she'd smelled such a sweet scent of possibility, and never would she have expected to find it in the foul, rustic stench of Damtown.

The noise of the market faded behind them, and while Rivah would not deign to look back, she knew a crowd followed, not out of respect as it should be, but out of curiosity, to see if the water of Zenthe could quench the fire of Kahmudj.

Rivah suppressed a giggle, her smile restrained to the serene curve of desire. Her mind whirled with scenarios and fantasies as she scanned the faces of the Kahmudj faithful who thronged on either side of the column, spanning the way, through the wide gate of Damtown and onto the road, skirting the soaring cliffs above the western end of Lake Sorrow, toward the narrow glen where the river was reborn, the Gates of Zenthe and the ancient dam.

The townspeople boiled around the mounted

soldiers and the marching line that followed them. Grim, determined, angry, hateful, these folk no longer held Zenthe's faith; Kahmudj filled their souls. Rivah lifted her chin, her eyes closing with confidence against the bright western sun. Yes, Kahmudj filled their souls, but they were still men, still women, and Rivah knew exactly what to do to turn them to her will. And she would. She would fuck every man in Damtown twice to prove the truth of her soaring hopes.

Could life be so sweet as to offer her pleasure and revenge on the same plate as Adita's hateful punishment?

Rivah opened her eyes and stared at the road winding above the placid waters of the lake. The Gates of Zenthe had always seemed more myth than faith, but as the golden line cleared the final bend, she could not suppress a gasp as amazement momentarily stole her resolve. Strategically placed, the dam filled a space between the rounded mountains on the western rim of what had once been an enormous canyon, what was now the immense cauldron of Sorrow, the largest lake in the world, the source of Zenthe's gifts to the lowland towns.

The mottled white wall of the dam looked like strong teeth in the enormous jaw of the mountain, stained with the ages of hundreds of generations since it had been built, layered with accretions of

concrete and patches, almost too big to comprehend. As they rode closer, she saw the shapes carved into the dam, the procession of figures, waist deep in Sorrow, cut into the inner face of the dam, Zenthe entwined with her lovers, fulfilled and whole.

Empty promises, Rivah thought.

She knew far below, beyond the dam, the River Bliss ran in a trickle from the western face, no deeper than Zenthe's ankles, awaiting the opening of the gates, the release of the goddess' blessing to the lowlands, all in the hands of the dam's keepers and divine generosity.

The crowd thinned a little as Casmin drove his horse harder, and the path resolved itself into a final winding climb and then leveled, approaching the wide top of the dam. Rivah appreciated the size of the construction and, for the very first time in her life, a sense of insignificance filled her, as if she were nothing but a tiny leaf blown against a mountain, vast in space and ancient in time. She saw the golden gleam of the gates, a dozen of them reflected in the broad lake across the face of the dam, the water shallow and scarce.

Sorrow was down, the drought lengthening the shores of the lake. It was a delicate balance, a matter of divine guidance, some said, controlling the flow of water from Sorrow to Bliss. Drain the lake too much and thousands of folk around the

lake might be affected, but if more water was not released downstream, the tribes of the desert paid the price.

Casmin and his closest guards broke free of the townfolk and spurred their mounts, hooves pounding on the rock road, clear of the crowd and the press of blue robes trotting now toward the dam, along the rim of the narrowing glen. Rivah saw the red light of the descending sun dance suddenly along the golden line of enormous geared wheels just below the parapet of the dam.

The wheels controlled the gates, and the gates controlled the water.

Above the gears, a wide promenade stretched from one side of Bliss Canyon to the river side, still hidden from her, but she realized the entire parapet of the dam, and the very road that lay before them, rippled like the waters of the lake, awash in blue silk pavilions with a black swarm of people moving above them, the line of commerce that crossed the chasm of Sorrow atop the dam.

Blue pavilions.

Sky blue, not the gold of Zenthe.

Casmin's arm pulled her against his chest protectively as he pressed his lips warm against her ear. "When we stop, you must stay close to me." He slowed his pace so that more of his men drew up behind him.

She focused on the shimmering blue silk. "I am

the First Priestess of Zenthe. They wouldn't dare harm me."

"I don't think they much favor our goddess, nor her servants."

Rivah smiled. "Casmin, I may be a priestess of Zenthe, and you may not have faith in my authority, but I am a woman first." Rivah squirmed deliberately, her action quickly rewarded with a noticeable swelling against her ass. "Have faith in that."

They came to a fork in the road. A narrow path parted on the right, winding down to the water, while the main road ran to the dam, the road cut into the very side of the valley wall. She stared at the elaborate floating docks that buffeted small barges from the rocky banks of the lake. Tall white stone pilings stretched into the air, the floating docks held to them by thick iron cuffs, allowing the docks to rise and fall.

The horses of Casmin's retinue slowed, leaning into the climb to the top of the dam, the swaying rhythm of their stride pressing the saddle against Rivah's pussy, stroking hard and deliberate until her lips were slick and the sweet ache of her clit was nearly unbearable.

A retinue of sky-blue Kahmudjans stood along the promenade, their robes swaying with the breeze atop the center of the massive dam, and Rivah saw that the line ended in a dais, and on the

dais a god stood, his robe gleaming ivory. Rivah's gaze would have found him even without the pale beacon of his robe. He stood tall, his shoulders squared, the front of his vestment open at the neck to show the deep cleft of his chest. He was all male, well-muscled, exuding virility even at a distance, with hair that shone like eilwood – dark brown, almost black, but highlighted by elusive strands of bronze. She stared openly, her lips curling into a smile of honest delight.

He was the key, and Rivah fervently hoped the seduction would be as enjoyable as his body suggested it could be.

Casmin slowed to survey his riders. The straggling blue line stretched behind them, the last men in the rank closing rapidly now, so that the soldiers of Zenthe rode four and five abreast, pushing the crowd of townsfolk and Kahmudjans aside. The foot soldiers were just clearing the fork, not far behind. Casmin waited until the horsemen had formed ranks and they rode at their head between the pavilions, crowded with staring faces, down the last stretch of road and then onto the ringing stonework of the dam. Echoing in the space above the lake, the horses' hoof beats sounded like summer hail. Casmin held Rivah with gentle strength, but Rivah had eyes only for the man in the ivory robe.

Four of her champion's best, each bearing one

of Rivah's handmaidens rode immediately behind them, the holy escorts carrying the priestesses to their duty, each of them destined for frenzied coupling with the man who bore them, to open the dam and return Sorrow to Bliss. The company rode down the center of the promenade until Casmin and Rivah's horse stood before the dais. Casmin's grip tightened, his left arm like a steel shield across her breasts.

But she saw only the god and her eyes met his, black pools of energy that Rivah instantly siphoned into her soul.

"I am Sul Tarkus, Vessel of the Allfather, Kahmudj. We welcome you to Damtown." He bowed with grace and respect, all the while his gaze never leaving Rivah's face.

Casmin bristled behind her, his arms tight against her sides. "Your gracious welcome is appreciated, Lord Tarkus, although misguided. This is the Gate of Zenthe. If anything, my lord, we should be greeting you. Please allow me to present Lady Rivah, First Priestess of Zenthe, and I am Casmin of Margate, Captain of Zenthe. This is the Gate of Zenthe and falls under the jurisdiction of the goddess, and therefore Zenthe's faithful daughter, the priestess Rivah."

Sul Tarkus' warm smile played against a dark gaze that brimmed with challenge as he stepped to the horse and raised his hands, prepared to help

Rivah down. She looked over her shoulder at Casmin, the captain's eyes cloudy with controlled ire, but he gave a curt nod and Rivah turned her attention back to Sul and the burning black eyes that locked with hers. Sul's wide hands almost circled Rivah's waist, lifting her from the back of the horse. His warmth and strength sent pleasant ripples of excitement through her and the desire to kiss him as her face passed his on her way to the ground was almost overwhelming.

"My lady, Rivah, the faithful of Kahmudj welcome you to Damtown," Sul purred, his voice as smooth as warm honey.

Rivah stared openly into the fanatic's face, assessing him, losing herself in the pull of his black gaze. Power swirled there.

And desire.

Rivah smiled. As simple as breath.

Sul crooked a small smile at Rivah, the promise of the curve enough to add new wetness between her legs. She'd fuck him for certain. It was just a matter of how long it would be before they tore the clothing off each other and how many times she came before she milked him of the last drop of his fire. She met his smile with an unspoken promise. Not long, Rivah thought, anticipation curling in her stomach.

And perhaps a dozen times.

With fluid grace, Casmin dismounted. He

approached Sul, close enough to protect Rivah, and gestured to the four holy escorts. The soldiers dismounted, helping each of the priestesses down from their mounts to stand near Casmin but the rest of the troop remained astride their horses. The foot soldiers stretched like a golden thread among the milling mob atop the dam.

The crowd seethed with violent expectation.

Rivah turned her attention back to the priest and she saw his black gaze turning to a storm. The heat from Sul's body reached out and caressed her, and she felt a moment of dizziness as Sul's arm circled her waist like a whip of iron and he spun her so that she faced Casmin.

"The Lady Rivah is most welcome here," Sul Tarkus almost whispered. "She will see the miracle of rebirth in the name of the mother goddess, for this wonder of a dam is called Zenthe, but the miracle will be Kahmudj's. Zenthe's follower's built a wall of stone, but it is given unto my lord to open it." Sul looked around the promenade at the thickening crowd of blue robed men and women.

"The stone is still strong, but I think your goddess' influence here has weathered to dust." Sul's hands clamped on Rivah's arms like vices as his head nodded an authoritative order.

Rivah gasped, shocked from her plotting and desires by sudden pain and fear. Sul pulled her

against him and backed away, a surge of blue robes issuing from behind him and all among the guards, armed men reaching for the priestesses, blades raised against Casmin's soldiers.

Sul's lips pressed against her ear, his whisper sending fire coursing through her veins. "Now you will know the power of faith."

* * * *

God moved within the breast of Sul Tarkus, Kahmudj triumphant in his soul. As all the years, all the memory of his lifetime parted like a veil, he knew what he saw before him now, what he held in his arms, was nothing less than destiny. All along the great causeway atop the dam, his will ran in waves of cerulean silk, a thousand voices with one tongue.

"Kahmudj," the horde yelled, a word like thunder to crack the sky and rain death upon the golden-robed soldiers of Zenthe.

The captain had been wise to keep his troop from dismounting. On horseback, they had a faint hope of escape, to break the human tide that washed around them. Among the cries of praise to the Allfather, Sul Tarkus heard screams now too, of men and horses and his vision caught details in the surging storm of blue and gold, a rearing steed with bloody hooves, the thrust of a spear and the

scramble of hard gallop clear of the crowd, too near the edge.

Like a leaf, rider and mount seemed to hang for a moment, before they tumbled over the low parapet at the edge of the dam and bounced thrice, each time leaving a wet shadow on the dam's face, before falling broken into the river below.

Sul held the priestess hard against him, and he smelled her scent as though he had bathed in her, sweat and fear, the sharp tang of desire, and where his hand cupped her breast, he felt her nipple, stiff as a holly thorn beneath the mist-thin gown she wore. He savored the twisting heat of her body against his, and his prick swelled beneath his robe so that it rode hard between the cheeks of her ass.

Truly the gifts of Kahmudj were boundless.

He saw the Zenthen captain then, hardly an arm's length away, penned behind a wall of Sul Tarkus' best warriors, all with orders not to harm the officers or the priestesses, if harm could be avoided. Sul Tarkus had seen the priestesses plucked from among the enemy's midst but then he had lost sight of them in the fight and the other officers had likewise vanished into a tangle of color and flashing steel, but the captain had hardly moved from the spot where he had first been attacked, holding his ground, trying to press

forward, to rescue the First Priestess or to slay Sul Tarkus.

Once in the desert, Sul Tarkus had seen a rogue lion beset by leopards, and the Zenthen captain fought like that lion against the blue-robed warriors, both gallant and ruthless, every blow struck fair and true. But god danced in the fire of the faithful's spear tips as they closed him in a flashing ring.

Golden silk grew streaked with flinging lines of blood as the captain slashed at his attackers, his short sword no match for the hooked tips of the Kahmudjan spears. Sul Tarkus saw the shadow of dismay on the man's face as he fought desperately to keep from being cut down.

"Do not maim him," Sul reinforced his command and he blue-robed warriors drew back, imprisoning the captain and parrying his blows, but no longer striking to kill or cripple. The circle of steel was like an island of near-stillness in the frenzied clash that stretched the length of the dam.

Half a dozen of the Zenthen guard had almost reached the road that led back to Damtown and safety, the line of resistance that blocked their path wavered before their short, frenzied charges. The pounding hooves of the horses raised clouds of dust so that the battle might have been in an inferno of heat and fire, a war between golden demons and blue spirits, both turning red in the

setting sun, writhing in the billowing clouds of dust.

The last of the Zenthens gathered behind the vanguard that had almost escaped, most still astride their mounts in a space they had cleared among the pavilions near the end of the causeway. Their blades held back the press of townsmen and faithful, even as their leaders charged the knot of blue-robed priests that barred their path.

The Zenthen priestess writhed hard against Sul Tarkus then and he felt his cock grow harder. He held her tight with one hand, with the other he reached down and stroked the mound of her pussy beneath the silk of her robe and his fingers dripped with her essence.

"Kahmudj!" he intoned, his voice ringing with the power of the god, louder than the battles, louder than the pounding hooves and crash of blade against blade.

Near at hand, the ring of warriors who had encircled the captain jerked and trembled at the cry, then echoed it, so the voice of Kahmudj rang from ten throats, then thundered as the cry spread until fifty called the lord's name.

"Kahmudj!"

In a blink, they had him, the lion, a leopard on each arm, tenacious and crazed with wild fury. The warriors dragged the captain down, raining blows on his back and head with their gloved fists,

taking his blade, binding him.

The god's power ran among the mob, giddy with their killing in his name, eager for the reward of Kahmudj's blessing and the subjugation of Zenthe once and forever.

The priestess pushed her butt against Sul's erect cock and ground against him there, the firm heat gripping him as expertly as if she held him in her cunt, rocking against him, sliding up and down the god's scepter, her breath panting in time with the screaming chant of the crowd.

"Kahmudj!"

The milling, bloodthirsty mob nearest Sul Tarkus grew still, their entire being given now unto worship, feeling the power of the Allfather flowing through Sul and into the massive stone of the dam, into the river, into the world.

As they grew still, pairs of priests in blue robes approached, each of them bearing between them a nearly naked Zenthen priestesses, their golden robes torn to cuffs and shreds, their beautiful hair all the colors of pleasure in the dusk fire, their eyes filled with terror but with wonder too, as the promise of Kahmudj stirred their hearts and blood.

Sul Tarkus had them all now, the priestesses and Zenthe's captain, and soon he would have the loyalty of all the desert tribes. He would bring life-giving water in the name of Kahmudj, would be

the avatar of fertility in his god's name.

All that remained was the diminishing knot of golden-robed soldiers who fought a desperate battle at the edge of the dam, like dancers in the fire and dust, only the riders visible above the cloud now, four of them still mounted, wheeling in a tightening circle, swords catching the dimming light of day, the screams of the dying lost in the echoing cry of "Kahmudj."

How could they stand, not only against vastly greater numbers, but against the very will of god? With his cock hard between the legs of the Zenthen priestess, pressed tightly between her hot thighs, Sul Tarkus closed his eyes and sent waves of Kahmudj's power out to the brave faithful who fought that last fight.

He opened his eyes and saw a single rider remaining, a woman in brown rather than the golden leather of the soldiers. She had escaped the circle of death by riding away from the road and toward the edge of the dam, surprising the priests on that side of her and cutting them down like wheat stalks.

A line of dust, red with blood and sunset, rose behind her as she wheeled and raced back toward the road, skirting the very edge of the causeway, the rim of the abyss, pressed now by priests who had recovered from their surprise.

Then her horse, a magnificent desert stallion

leapt the railing and, in spite of the divine fervor that illuminated Sul, despite the hard grip of the priestess' thighs around his cock, his heart leapt with the horse and, distantly, he regretted that one so bold must die.

Like another falling leaf, horse and rider, they seemed to hang in the air for a moment, then momentum carried them forward, so the horses' hooves struck the dam's face, near where it met the rocky slope of the mountain. With expert grace, the woman held the horse, so that it stood for an instant on the steep curve of the dam, and, a miracle, she steadied the beast there long enough for it to find footing.

At the top of the dam, the blue-robed followers gathered at the railing, the bravest of them beginning to clamber over it, trying to see if pursuit might be possible. A line of defenders began to build along the hillside. The woman could not ride upward now, but Sul Tarkus knew that had never been her intention.

Like a shadow in the red light, she rode her amazing steed down the wall of the dam at its juncture with the mountain, using the rocks of the hillside to steady her horse when the way became too steep. The crowd above her howled and some of them threw their hooked spears, but she had descended too far and the spears fell wide of their mark, spinning like red sparks into the river's

gorge.

Like a wisp of legend, she disappeared, swallowed by distance and the deepening gloom at the base of the dam. The faintest trace of regret nudged Sul Tarkus that even one had escaped. The moment of disappointment faded rapidly in the ecstasy of Kahmudj's rejoicing, heard in the triumphant shouts of the faithful calling his name washing him in divinity.

Molten heat in the press of the priestess' body as she turned in his arms further fueled the torch that blazed inside him. She burned against him, her lips on his throat kissing, her hand on his chest, her eyes shining like crimson fire.

"Who are you, my lord?" she asked him.

And he answered, truth like the sun's light in his soul.

"I am Kahmudj."

Chapter 7

The sun's own blood ran into Casmin's eyes, the red, western sky seeping in slow waves from wounds around the crown of his head like a veil across his vision. The name of the devil still echoed in the thousand throats of Zenthe's foes, enemies of the goddess who had won a terrible victory, the chanted name like thunder in the sunset.

"Kahmudj. Kahmudj."

But the thunder grew quiet and Casmin became aware of several things at once, the rough concrete beneath his cheek, the lingering heat of the summer day, the press of bodies close around him, and the echo of the multitude's feet upon the dam as they shifted in anxious anticipation.

His own breath, ragged and wet, grew louder in his ears than the crashing noise of the crowd. Hands on his arms, beneath his shoulders, lifted him and for a moment blackness took him.

A trickle of bitter wine washed against his lips and thick fingers, implacable as stakes, pressed into his jaws, and he opened and drank what was given him.

Then the crimson curtain turned to fire and the dozen cuts in his torso and legs sang their protest in stinging pain. Blood formed a crawling lattice on his skin as he was raised to a standing position only to sway as if carried on a scarlet tide.

Casmin opened his eyes. Some dark spice in the wine made his heart race and his pain diminish, though now he ached with a terrible thirst.

He saw at once the astonishing degree of his failure and even the sweet spell of the wine could not save him from a despair that made sport of his agony and whispered that he should have died.

Death would have been forgiveness.

The dark cleft below the dam swam into slow focus. The Kahmudjan priest had bade his men raise Casmin near the edge of the dam, so that he saw the river in the valley to the west, thin and dark as crusted gore in dusk's shadows. The last slice of the setting sun danced in lines of light at the glittering periphery of his vision.

The river led to the desert, to all the lands where men and women waited for Zenthe's gift. Casmin saw the enormous sluice gate of the dam, the gate that should have been opened by the ceremony of Zenthe and he turned, fighting the

hands and ropes that held him, his head dancing like the rays upon the river, his hand barely reaching an empty hilt.

Casmin turned to face the darkness.

The priest of Kahmudj stood before him, and in the echoing misery of Casmin's mind, he remembered the man's name, Sul Tarkus, high priest of the rebel god, though where he had heard the name, Casmin could not remember.

Perhaps he had always known it.

"Worship me," Sul Tarkus said, "and you will join us in the new paradise."

Casmin's vision blurred and then focused again and he saw that the big man in the blue robe held tightly to the slender, pale arm of Rivah. Behind her, Casmin saw the other priestesses of Zenthe, naked and subdued, captives of Kahmudj.

Casmin's mind worked against the wine, assessing the odds, trying to devise some plan to gain time, or to buy freedom for Rivah, but the echoing thunder in his head was too loud, the dancing waters in his arms and legs too swift, too filled with bloody light.

"Worship me," Sul Tarkus ordered.

Casmin pulled against the iron grip of his captors. He had failed Zenthe in every sense, but he could not betray her.

He could not betray Adita.

The eyes of Sul Tarkus read Casmin's answer

and he spoke to the guards, massive men in the sky-blue mail of Kahmudj's soldiers, "Take him to town and prepare him as I have ordered. I will be along when the rite is done."

Casmin lunged, but the muscles in his legs were only delusions thin as evening mist and he crumpled, caught in the arms of the guards. He heard the mournful music of chains and felt the chill of steel cuffs, hard and tight as fate, close about his wrists. A pole passed across his shoulders and they hauled him to his feet again, the sun just a point now, a last drop of crimson life at the rim of the sky's marbled bowl.

With all his strength, he turned his body toward Rivah and croaked, through lips dry as salt, "I'm sorry."

The last thing he heard, as his captors raised the bar to which he was bound, as pain and the bitter wine became nightfall, then nightmare, was Rivah's voice.

She uttered a little sound of scorn and then a song of golden laughter.

"Oh, my captain," she said. "Do not apologize.

"You have given me everything I desire."

* * * *

Rivah's skin burned. Sul Tarkus held her, and everywhere he touched her skin she caught fire.

High priest of the god Kahmudj, the man who would see the submission of Zenthe, and Rivah wanted nothing more at the moment than to fuck him as hard as she could, until they both came again and again and again.

He was everything Rivah wanted in a man; strong, handsome, virile — the length and thickness of the rod that parted her ass cheeks was solid proof of that — and, most importantly, Sul Tarkus was the man who would enslave and humiliate Adita.

Imagining Adita dragged through the muck to kiss Sul's sandaled feet sent a shiver through Rivah's pussy. Of course, Rivah would be right beside him, her hand ever so lovingly stroking his enormous cock. And they would fuck in front of Adita, as punishment. Rivah would have him fuck her in every way a man could — from behind, him on top, her on top, his cock in her ass, him filling her mouth with his come, every way, and Rivah would scream with the power and shock of her orgasms and Adita would only weep in jealous longing for something she would . . .

Never.

Have.

Lost in her vision, Rivah hardly saw the surging crowd, blue robes like veins among them, the white wall of the dam painted rose by the sunset, and a growing throng lining the rocky walls above

the trickle of river deep in the valley of shadow. Her heart beat faster with the imminence of her triumph.

She almost regretted the loss of Casmin. He'd been an enjoyable lover over the years, but she owed him nothing. Even from their very first fuck the night of Adita's failure with the Hawk, Rivah knew Casmin was devoted — no, in love — with Adita.

His loss would be another knife through the bitch's heart.

Rivah watched the handsome captain dragged away, her spiteful parting words only the admission of truth.

She turned in Sul's arms, her pussy aching to be filled by him. She pressed against him, writhing.

"My lord," she breathed against his neck, one hand sliding to the tight cheeks of his ass, her fingers stroking across the hard roundness.

"We are the vessels of divinity. Let us be one."

Sul grabbed Rivah's arms, holding her away from him, so that she half hung over the abyss, the shock of the sudden chasm drawing a sharp gasp from her. Even as his hands bruised the flesh of her arms, Rivah's heart raced with desire. He stared at her with eyes that brimmed with lust and power, a power Rivah struggled to comprehend. Even at her most pious, she had ever doubted the true nature of Zenthe's magic. The goddess

preserved the youth of her priestesses, but that might have only been an illusion maintained by the mystic waters of the Cup. Certainly the gift of bounty was no certainty, perhaps no more than the vagaries of seasons and fortune.

And now, more than ever, she believed that Zenthe might only be a faith, not a goddess at all, for Rivah had never felt before what she felt in Sul Tarkus. She stood in the presence of the divine.

Kahmudj.

A storm of triumph filled his face. "My dear, yes, I will fill you," he looked away from her, then turned her to look over the chasm or down into it, as she chose. Rivah forgot Adita, forgot Casmin. She followed Sul's gaze beyond the marvel of stone and metal to the deep valley and the narrow, tranquil waters of the river that flowed from the dam's base.

"On the Balcony of Life, we will make the ceremony that gives the lake unto the desert." His grip tightened on her arms, his cock like a pillar of stone pressing against her stomach. "When the desert screams in exaltation, it will be Kahmudj they thank. It will be my seed that blesses them."

"Now, my lord. Let us not make the desert wait another moment."

Sul's growl shivered Rivah's spine. She wanted him, all of him, in every way, even if he proved dangerous.

He was a man; she would fuck him and find his weakness.

He held her arm and led her toward the ornate platform that extended from the center of the dam, directly above the spillway. The crowd rumbled with a sound that echoed in the ancient stones. For centuries, the priestesses of Zenthe had commanded the opening of the gate from that balcony, the ceremony steeped in traditions and rites. Rivah had never been part of the ceremony before, but other priestesses had said that the Ceremony of Bliss which marked the opening of the dam gates was the highlight of their service to Zenthe.

"Your kind has blasphemed the opening of these gates with selfish pleasure and the debased urges of your sisters," Sul condemned. He pulled her tight to his side, her ass pressed against the ornately carved marble of the balcony. The edge of anger in his voice both excited and worried Rivah as she glanced over her shoulder to the river far below them.

He looked at her, a fury of power shining in his gaze. "Not this time."

He turned to the crowd, still as the mountain, the sudden embodiment of calm. Rivah's heart raced as the crowd pressed close around them, a sea of blue and white, men and women.

Stilling.

Sul's unspoken desire manifested in the pure force of his will. She heard the distant pavilion walls sway in the breeze, pinions curled and flapped, she heard the swish of a horse's tail, the creak of leather and jangle of buckles, the endless gurgle of the river far below them, her own heartbeat, pounding so loud she thought all must hear it.

And the wind.

Sul scanned the gathering, a thousand living souls held by the gaze of the man who gripped her tight, his fingers trapping her by strength and promise.

He breathed deeply and spoke. Honey flowed among the multitude.

"Today, my brothers and sisters," Sul spoke clearly, his every word weighted, the timbre a perfect pitch of authority and benediction, and to Rivah, pressed closely against his side, his voice was no louder than the voice one might use to ask for the salt down a farm family's long table. Yet, Rivah knew that even the most distant guard at his post near the distant shore of the sea of humanity heard every syllable Sul said.

"Today, these gates will open and the life-giving waters of Sorrow will flow into Bliss. And some of you may ask, why would this be any different from any opening of the gates in the past? I will tell you, my faithful family." He

looked at Rivah, his grip on her waist lightening, his fingers caressing the thin garment she still wore. He locked his gaze with hers, his smile belying the storm in his eyes and the hard clench of his jaw.

“Because it will not be the goddess who opens the gates, my family; it will not be Zenthe.” The tearing of Rivah’s garment seemed to respect the silence Sul had created, the gossamer material barely protesting as he ripped it from her.

She did not flinch or move to cover herself. She was a priestess of Zenthe, perfect and sublime and there was no shame in her bearing, only the promise of ecstasy to every man who looked upon her.

He stared at her bare body, devouring her with a look that embodied lust, but also grudging respect. He wouldn’t kill her, Rivah calculated. No, he didn’t want to kill her.

He wanted to fuck her.

“It will not be Zenthe’s cries of pleasure that heralds the flow of water,” Sul pulled Rivah to him, her bare naked skin against him, his impressive cock a rod caressing her ribs.

As thick as her wrist, she thought, and moaned.

“It will be Kahmudj’s call of triumph.”

The crowd erupted, cheering, crying until as a unified voice, a pulse as pure as passion, the roar became a chant.

“Kahmudj, Kahmudj.”

Sul’s voice raked over Rivah’s bare flesh. “Worship him.”

Rivah did not hesitate but slid down Sul’s chest, across the robed muscle of his stomach, his cock riding the cleft of her breasts until her knees rested on the thick cushion of her vanquished dress. Rivah’s hands gripped the golden cord that bound Sul’s garment, her fingers expertly untying the knot that hid his body from her. As the shimmering material parted, Rivah gasped as Sul’s magnificent form uncloaked. A modest loin cloth covered his groin, but much to Rivah’s delight, the impudent head had already escaped the material, the swollen knob adorned with a glistening drop of pre-come that Rivah thrilled to taste.

Her mouth watered, and instinctively she wet her lips. She looked up from her prostration, her heart pounding at the maelstrom of lust swirling in Sul’s gaze.

Rivah smiled, genuine and full, her heart hammering so fast that she barely pulled breath into her lungs. Never taking her gaze from Sul, she leaned into him, her lips so close to the diamond-crowned head of his cock she could almost taste it. She inhaled slowly, savoring the masculine musk he exuded, drawing heat from him to fuel the rapid acceleration of the

conflagration within her own body.

This cock would be all hers.

Her hands slid up the thick slabs of his thighs, kneading the rock-hard muscles as she ascended. At the juncture of his legs, her fingers splayed into the thicket of dark curls that concealed the base of Sul's prick. Lightning passed through her as her fingers slid along the silky skin just above the hairline. A single finger traveled along a prominent vein, taking the sweet journey the length from base to bulb, ending just before contact with the delicate ridge of the swollen head.

No, that reward was meant for her tongue.

Her finger slid from his cock to rest upon his thigh, and while the other hand circled his cock, holding it steady, Rivah indulged in her own pleasure.

Tongue between wet lips, she slowly lapped up the drop, the salty pre-come oiling her mouth with promise.

Slowly, lovingly, she bathed the red crown lavishly with long swathes of her tongue, small kisses along the ridge, the flickering of the veins until Sul growled, his prick sinewy hard, a lance that could easily split her in half.

Her lips pressed tight against the salty eye, Rivah slid down the shaft almost to the base, filling her mouth and throat as she pressed forward, the tight ring of her lips thrilling at the

pulse of him. Behind her, the crowd continued to chant, ceaseless, the tone steady, the strength of it inspiring even in its controlled volume.

“Kahmudj. Kahmudj.”

Rivah closed her eyes and rejoiced as Sul’s cock passed between her lips to be cradled by her tongue, massaged by her throat, then was withdrawn only to be repeated, slowly at first, the rhythm building with the chanting.

His hand stroked her hair, then tangled in the crown, guiding her, building the rhythm. She longed to devour his gift, to fill her mouth with his come even as she dripped with wanting his cock deep inside her pussy. She struggled to increase speed, her tongue wild as she pulled away from his member, her suckling intense as she took as much of his length into her mouth as she could.

But Sul’s fingers in her hair restrained her, maintaining the rhythm he wanted, slow, building, unbearable to Rivah as her tongue watered to be coated with his seed.

She whimpered in protest and a chuckle echoed from Sul’s chest, almost lost in the rising tide of chanting. His rock-hard prick pulsed against her lips and Rivah knew he was close to climax. Just a few more hungry entreaties and she would again know the power of woman.

Sul’s fingers tightened and pulled her head away, and as her lips slid over his cock, the

thought of trying to maintain her position with her teeth flickered across her mind, but before she could act, the reddened, soaked head slipped past her lips to stand at full attention between them.

Sul's intention was manifest in the lust that shone in his eyes. He released her hair and gripped her shoulders then lifted her up to a bruising, possessive kiss. His tongue invaded her mouth, ravishing it with a hunger that turned Rivah's knees to water. She wrapped her arms around him, pressing her body to his, writhing, arching, her pussy's wetness adding to her saliva that pearled in the dark thatch at the base of his staff.

Sul's hands circled Rivah's waist, lifting her. Their lips parted and Rivah read Sul's desire as clearly as she knew her own. She wrapped her legs around him, opening herself to receive the ultimate gift.

"Praise him," Sul demanded as he lowered her, the head of his prick resting just at the gate of her cunt.

Rivah panted, her heat pushing her beyond caring. "Kahmudj, I am yours. Take me." She whispered, oblivious to any blasphemy or perjury, wanting only for Sul to fuck her.

Sul smiled, and for a blink, a shock of fear coursed through Rivah as she saw the understanding in his eyes. He held no illusions as

to her sincerity, knew it for what it was, but that did not stop him from impaling her slowly, each inch a surge of delight until he filled her.

Rivah's eyes closed and she arched against the pure pleasure of his invasion. Instinct relaxed her as he pushed against her limits, the wedge of the head pressing deep into her, pushing into her until she thought she would tear to pieces. She groaned and writhed, squirming to accommodate him all the way to the hilt.

He turned slowly, the movement of his cock inside rippling pleasure through her body. He lifted her and lowered her, her slick pussy holding tight to his cock, her juices covering the length of him. His grip changed, his hands holding her at the ribs as he leaned her back. The cold shock of the narrow marble railing registered for only a moment as Sul thrust deep and fast into her, his leverage improved by her new angle and her weight no longer his concern. Rivah gasped and arched, her head falling back into the nothingness of the void between the edge of the balcony and the river far below.

He worked in her, sliding forcefully into her pussy. As he withdrew, Rivah felt suspended in time until he drove home again, entering her with all the wonder of his first thrust. She gripped his arms, squirming, the strong muscles of her cunt tightening around his cock, desperate to hold him

within. His mouth descended on her right breast, his mouth burning her flesh. She clawed at his arms, her passion rising quickly. She wanted more, she wanted him hard and fast, pounding into her until her teeth rattled, but Sul maintained his steady rhythm, his pace unwavering even as she writhed and bucked against him. She would come soon, in spite of Sul's measured thrusts. There was little that would stop the building orgasm. Her only remaining question was how many times she would come before he finally came as well.

Behind her, she heard the congregation, their chants growing louder, echoed in Sul's breath and the rhythm of his thrusts. She cried out in pleasurable frustration as her body whined with the need for release. Sul's lips tightened around her nipple, suckling, pulling the tender flesh lightly between his teeth as his tongue flickered wildly. She growled as a tide of pleasure coursed through her, settling in her groin, adding to the ball of longing that waited to blow apart.

The crowd's ecstatic chant grew more frantic, faster, as did Sul's thrusts, each one pushing Rivah closer to climax. Below her, she heard the grinding of metal, the sharp clash of stone on stone.

The crowd's cries echoed in the abyss, across the deepening red of the dam face, close to deafening, the singular voice of the mob barely

audible over the thunder of her blood in her veins. So close to bliss she was almost blind to it.

He withdrew, as he had a hundred times already, but instead of the hot rush of his flesh into hers, only a cold slap of air struck her cunt. Rivah groaned, agony stabbing her, the building orgasm turning crystalline, cracking, only moments away from her bliss being vanquished entirely. She clawed at his arms, mute in her horror, tears threatening to fall as a pitiful whimper escaped her throat.

Sul stared at her, triumphant. He gripped her waist and in a fluid motion turned her over, bending her over the railing so that Rivah looked down into the chasm, the trickle of the river Bliss far, far below. Instinctively she gripped the narrow ledge, her feet planted in a wide stance as Sul pressed against her ass. And on mark with the roaring voice, Sul pressed the head of his cock against her pussy again and thrust into her with one even motion.

Rivah curled her spine against the ecstatic thrill, pulling air into her lungs as overwhelming sensations flooded back into her body.

Her gaze locked on the river far below her, her hair swirling around her in an auburn cloud, lifted by an updraft from the valley. Sul's cock drove into her, the chanting and his thrusts gaining again in power and speed. He gripped her hip

with one wide hand, pulling her back against him, a low growl of desire adding to the electricity of his fucking.

Faster, harder, voices raging to the sky, the grinding of stone and metal. Each thrust more powerful than the previous, driving deep into Rivah, the thick veined cock lifting her toward oblivion.

“Kahmudj! Kahmudj!”

So faint, the trail of a string upon the skin. Sul pulled her against him, his hips pounding against her ass with each shattering thrust, the last few pushing her sensations to the precipice.

“Kahmudj! Kahmudj!”

“KAHMUDJ!”

Shards of light flashed before her closed eyes as her soul exploded, splintering into ripples of pleasure that seemed endless. Suspended over the edge, fire engulfed her in unbearable pleasure as a rush of air whipped her hair away from her face and the unrestrained power of Sorrow spilled out of the gate of the dam to the river Bliss far below. Behind her, Sul Tarkus thrust one last time into her, deep, the flesh of her pussy pulsing with pleasure as he came hard, his hot load released in a cry that reached the clouds.

“KAHMUDJ!!”

The chanting broke apart into frenzied screams and cheers as the dam roared with life, the water

rushing past the gate to turn the quiet flow below into a torrent.

Rivah shuddered, her body weak, her heart racing dangerously fast. Sul, spent, stayed deep within her, his softening cock still warm and pleasing. She squirmed, exhausted, her arms trembling from exertion. With a deep breath, Sul withdrew and Rivah groaned a mixture of sorrow and relief. For the first time in Rivah's life, she doubted her ability to endure any more fucking.

He pulled her away from the edge of the balcony and into his arms. He took possession of her mouth again, his tongue leisurely in its revels. He pulled away and gazed at her, his cock already showing signs of renewed life.

"You, and this dam, are no longer Zenthe's. You belong to Kahmudj." He reached down and stroked her pussy, teasing her clit until she squirmed with longing, pressing her cunt against his hardened cock, oblivious to any previous doubts she might have had.

And with a conviction Rivah had never known before, she nodded to Sul, her words the most sincere she'd ever spoken.

"Yes, my lord. I belong to Kahmudj."

"I belong to you."

Chapter 8

Zenthe's cauldron still smoldered. The goddess' fading fury rippled within the mountain in nervous tremors that set white stones askew, roiled the shallow waters of the little pools that had once been a lake and broke the sun into sparks. In one pool, Casmin lay, eyes closed, sun-warmed waters caressing him like slender hands, washing away the agony of his failure.

A shadow fell across his gaze, turning the red light beyond his heavy eyelids dark, eclipsing the sun. Casmin opened his eyes and saw Adita, the goddess incarnate, the sun making a corona of her golden hair. She leaned over him, her green eyes catching the embers of broken fire, her lips curved in a smile of tender forgiveness.

But he saw the pain in her eyes and he ached to take it from her, and the memory of her agony in those days after Zenthe's rage returned to him as though it had never passed. He felt the water

holding him down, in darkness, where he might be safe.

For seasons, he lay in the warmth while rains fell and snow gathered high on the rim of the crater only to slide down to fill the cooling cauldron, uniting the pools to become a lake again. The level of the placid water rose slowly until after only three years, Zenthe's mirror had been restored and the shallow pools united within its still surface, undisturbed now by the aftershocks of the goddess' sorrow and disappointment.

But that had all been years ago.

Casmin dreamed a dream that lied.

The splashing of his own legs in the tub woke him and Casmin thought for a moment that part of what he dreamed had been true. He saw a tarnished golden crown of light in the honey-blond hair of a woman who stood over him. Naked to her waist, she reached down into the tub to press a cloth, fragrant with salve that smelled of pitch and roses, against the long, seeping wound in his chest.

A molten flow of light fell across her bare shoulders and Casmin saw her perfect breasts, not as round and full as Adita's, but well-shaped with small, pink nipples, and even in the haze of pain and the cursed wine he had been given, his cock began to swell. The woman regarded him

impassively as she continued to treat his wound.

Casmin half lay in a shallow bathing tub, made of caulked wood and ringed with metal that traced cool lines on his back. Warm, bloody water filled the tub, just to Casmin's waist and his back pressed against one side of the vessel. His arms rested atop the tub's rim and he realized, with a stab of worry, that he could not move them.

The woman must have seen his concern and stopped her application of medicine to the wet, red line sliced into the muscles of his chest. She stroked his left arm, though her gesture had no true tenderness in it. He read nothing in her gaze. Nothing at all.

She checked the security of the iron band around his wrist. Casmin made a fist of his left hand and pulled against the cuff. He heard and felt a chain growing taut and his hand hardly moved. Both hands were ringed in steel and bound so that he could not move them beyond a constrained distance, the chains fastened to the tub itself or perhaps to the floor beside the tub. He grimaced and tried to rise but only managed to thrust his chest forward, his legs reluctant to move at all.

"Be careful," the woman said without feeling. "You will open your wounds again."

He reluctantly settled back into the water, his breath deeper, his mind clearing enough to realize

the hopelessness of his position. The tub stood in the approximate center of a large room, with a dirt floor and wooden walls. A narrow door opened in one wall to dimness beyond and narrow windows showed darkness, whether of nightfall or shutters, Casmin could not tell. Another woman stood a short distance behind his nurse, dressed in the blue robe of the Kahmudjans, her chestnut hair cut short so it fell like a hood upon her shoulders. The woman who bathed Casmin wore the blue robe too, but she had slipped it from her arms and let it gather around her waist, leaving her torso bare.

But the two women were of little concern to Casmin.

No, his anxiety grew from the two men who stood on either side of the single door. Imposing figures in loose blue trousers, with heavily muscled chests crossed with leather straps and the thick meat of their stomachs banded by a wide leather belt that was both adornment and armor. Massive of bicep, shaven-headed, with eyes the color of ice, each man was armed with a deadly axe, held loosely so that the wide, gleaming blade projected like a cruel erection before them, the handle long enough to reach the floor.

Casmin had seen such warriors before, foresters from the far north. A half dozen like them served under his command back at the temple, all masters of the unstoppable killing stroke, their

axes light as dancers' batons in their callused hands. Weakened, Casmin had no chance against them, even if he could free himself from the cuffs.

The chestnut-haired woman whispered to the guards and departed the room through the wooden door. The men hardly moved, no more than oaks.

"I am Selete," Casmin's nurse said, her voice warming a little to reward him for his cooperation. "Servant of Sul Tarkus, beloved of Kahmudj."

"Casmin, guardian of Zenthe," he said, trying to pin her gaze with his.

But her attention was all on her work, smoothing the ointment into his cuts and gashes. Selete's fingers blessed him, warm lines like little trails of fire, working down the hard muscles of his stomach, into the thatch of dark hair, lifting his cock, peeling back its hood, leaning close to examine him.

Casmin's prick jerked under the attention, in spite of his mind working at the knot of his imprisonment.

"My lord will take your goddess," Selete said matter-of-factly, "and she will be his woman."

Casmin's hardening cock jumped in her hand and he felt his balls tighten.

She looked at him then, her eyes almost the same gold as her hair, luminous and beautiful. "She will know the unsurpassed bliss of his love.

"Sul Tarkus says you are to return to your mountain, to your goddess, to bear her the message that the master comes for his concubine and that she must make ready to serve him."

He spoke in a low voice, hoping that the two guards would not hear, "How can you serve one who preaches slavery?" he asked. "Zenthe will save you."

"There is no slavery under love," she said, and caressed his cock.

She leaned over into the tub and Casmin wondered if she was going to put her mouth on him, but only her fingers touched him, stroking his length to full erection.

Casmin's attention was diverted by the sudden movement of one of the guards. The man stepped closer with two long strides while the other waited by the door. The near one held his enormous axe in his left hand and his right hand rested on the short handle of something in his belt.

Selete lifted Casmin's prick out of the water, her other hand reaching under him to cup his balls gently.

The blue-robed woman reappeared in the doorway, the hood of her gown drawn over her head. Casmin watched with growing horror as the guard, with slow dignity, set his axe aside, knelt beside the tub and drew a gleaming crescent of steel from his waistband.

Casmin knew the blade — a northman's gelding knife. He fought the chains, half rising in the tub, his cock twisting in Selete's hands, but her grip on his testicles merciless in its purpose, squeezed him hard enough to hurt, his poor prick just an obstacle now as she offered his balls to the knife.

Casmin stared in horror. The whisper of the steel edge's breath, cold and sharp passed a chill down his prick on its way to the goal of separating his balls from his body.

Casmin heard a sound like wood being split and the guard with the terrible knife reeled backward, the crescent blade flying away, a spinning pinwheel of relief.

The blue-robed woman twirled like a child's top, and Casmin heard a terrible crunching. The guard thrashed again, falling this time into the tub, tilting it.

Casmin did not hesitate, but threw his weight against the fallen man, so the tub teetered for a moment, water sloshing wildly, and then fell with a wet crash, taking Casmin and the guard with it. The dead man spilled out, sprawling, blood from his cut throat mingling with the bathwater, turning the earthen floor to rusty mud. Casmin stared at the dead guard as time slowed, his eyes wide open, like ice grown gray under a stormy sky.

Casmin tensed his arms and shoulders as the tub fell, guiding as much as he could with his weight to keep the wicked bracelets from breaking his wrists. He saw now that the chains that held him had been anchored to rings in the floor and the tub lay across the one that bound his left arm, so that his own weight helped hold him down. His right arm though was almost free, the chain having given way at its ring. With a desperate effort, Casmin scrambled out of the tub, still pinned to it by his left wrist, and tried to understand what had happened.

Selete scrambled backward from the carnage and stood a few feet away, but far from cowardly, she reached to pick up the axe of the dead warrior.

The other guard stood poised, his enormous weapon held as lightly as if it had been a staff, the hard muscles of his arms and chest bunched like monstrous snakes. Perfectly still, he watched the blue-robed woman frozen in a crouch before him.

Something gleamed in her hand, a vicious circle of bloody metal.

Selete reached the axe and lifted it, ignoring Casmin still chained as he was, and advancing toward the woman in flowing blue. Cerulean that rose like an angry sea, the robe cast away in a sweeping lash, the end of it entangling Selete's legs so she stumbled and lost her footing on the muddy floor. She reeled under the weight of the

axe, and fell in a heap.

The woman who had worn the robe stood like a sculptor's masterpiece, a goddess of vengeance eternal in the moment before she slays. Beneath the robe she wore a short girdle and a tight leather vest, so that her arms and beautiful, long legs were bare, her skin the color of golden ale, and her hair flowing, long and much darker than chestnut.

Casmin knew her at once.

Elena. His scout.

Casmin pulled at the chain on his left arm, desperate to reach Elena's side and aid her in the unequal fight. He gripped with his right, pulled harder, and he felt the chain grind under the tub and sudden as lightning, the ring tore free. Dragging the chains, he started across the room.

But Elena did not need him.

The axeman moved with fluid perfection, the massive wedge arcing in blue light, but Elena was shadow, racing before it, spinning beside the man, in counterpoint to the momentum of his swing, the steel circle in her hand uncoiling, a whip of razor metal, like the kiss of lightning against a tree, opening his throat from ear to ear.

The momentum of his swing carried him halfway across the room, dead weight flung by his own hand to fall across the body of his comrade, the axe blade burying itself in the floor.

Elena faced Selete, who had risen, struggling

just to hold the axe. There was no contest at all.

The scout spun again with shadow's grace, reaching out to catch Selete's bunched robe and pulling her hard, one hand going up to take the axe out of the Kahmudjan's hands as though Selete was only a child who had found a forbidden tool. Elena spun her around, tossing the big weapon aside and with one motion stripped the robe over Selete's butt, and kicked her naked to the floor.

With quick efficiency, Elena cut the Kahmudjan's robe into strips and tied and gagged Selete with it, pausing only when she found in a pocket a ring with a single key. She tossed the key to Casmin and he quickly freed himself from the chains.

The shreds of his armor lay in one corner of the room and he salvaged what he could, his heart pounding with fury at what they had almost done to him.

"Hurry," Elena said. "I have horses outside." He followed her out of the room. Quick steps took him past another dead guard, and soon to an abandoned gate that led into the summer night. Elena moved like a dark beacon before him and steadily, every hoof beat clearing the fog from his head, Casmin rode out of Dامتown whole and free beneath the moon of Zenthe's mercy.

* * * *

Casmin and Elena charged though the summer night. On the descending road east of Damtown, they kept to the road at first only because they found no other way. Through the darkness they drove their horses' reluctant steps and more than once, Casmin used all his equestrian skills to recover his horse from a fall. As they skirted the edge of Sorrow, across the depthless blackness of the lake Casmin saw lights dancing against thin clouds, like a curtain of pale shimmering silk against the dome of night. His eyes burned with the vision and the knowledge that the illumination was nothing less than the ceremony at the dam, the burning celebration of Zenthe's defilement.

Elena followed the direction of his gaze. "The bastards killed all of them," she said, her voice edged with sorrow and rage. "All the men."

"What of Rivah?" he asked. "And her women?"

"We cannot save them, Casmin. They are lost." Then she whipped the reins of her horse and rode eastward. Casmin looked once more at the ghostly light above the lake of Sorrow, and then rode after her.

The pounding of the horses' hooves echoed like drums and, after awhile, every jolt felt like it would split Casmin's bloody chest into two hemispheres of agony, spill his heart and guts

across the lathered horse and leave him in the dust, food for ants and wild dogs. Elena encouraged him with cries of "Ride!" and "For the goddess' sake," and his pain turned from sharp to dull, one more throbbing rhythm in the endless night.

When they reached the first forest, Elena slowed and led him from the road, into trees that seemed to grow dense as boards in a wooden fence. Yet, even in the starlit darkness, she found a path. The horses passed single-file through the labyrinth of silent wardens, the thunder of the wild ride down the road giving way to sudden stillness, broken by the occasional cry of a bird and the whirring velvet of insects' song. She lead the way, her eyes sharp as an owl's or a wolf's, and Casmin guessed they followed a deer path or some narrow trace etched over generations by furtive men who avoided the public road.

The lines of darkness between the towering trees turned deep purple, then violet. The leafy canopy overhead grew green and golden with the first slow blink of dawn.

Gratefully, Elena led them into a clearing, where she motioned for Casmin to dismount. "You will rest till the sun has passed the sky's tent pole," she said. "There is a town not far east. I will learn the news there and return to you before we travel tonight. If you do not see me by sunset, ride

on alone.”

Casmin wanted to tell her not to go, to rest with him, but when his feet touched the ground, the aching line in his chest pulled him down. He fell to his knees, head filled with black water, sinking into it, drowning in the shadowed depths of Zenthe’s Sorrow.

Chapter 9

Crimson lines streaked the western sky as the sun settled into the mouth of the earth, the massive red eye already half-consumed by the horizon. Behind Adita, the song of the temple in evening repose could not still the concern that churned like an unhappy brook in her belly.

For almost a week, her nights had been filled with fevered dreams, as though the goddess herself thrashed in nightmare, urgent dreams of inexpressible loss and desolation. Adita felt tensions within the visitors to the temple, so many loyal followers, and yet she saw shadows upon their faces as if they too sensed the sorrow of the goddess or, worse, her absence.

Billowing clouds had passed before the sun to crawl up the dome of the darkening sky and cover the temple in shifting shadows. Adita stood in the far courtyard, looking west when the cries of a guard alerted her before she saw the black figure

of a runner, struggling with the ascending road that led the final leagues to the temple. Strong men in golden robes went down to meet him and escort him to the temple. Kai stood beside Adita, a pace before her. Half crazed with thirst the runner lunged toward her. Kai restrained him until two of the priestesses appeared to attend the messenger. Wet clothes clung to his parched skin and watered wine quickly banished the madness in his gaze, only to have it replaced by terrible despair.

"The Kahmudjans have taken Damtown," He said. "They opened the gate."

All Adita's training, all her communion with her goddess had not prepared her for the turn of events that now circled like scavengers. She did not move, her knees weak, her heart squeezed by fear and worry, but she managed to keep her countenance a mask of authority while her mind scrambled for answers and solutions.

"What of Captain Casmin, and the First Priestess? What of the retinue we sent?"

The runner shook his head, his face twisting in regret. "Your Grace, I do not know their fates. The folk in Malton only spoke of the opening of the gate, and how the Kahmudj shut it again soon after, proclaiming that it would be open only when Kahmudj decreed it."

"The Kahmudj hold Damtown and the city is swollen with the desert dwellers that have come to

worship with them.”

Adita looked at Kai, her friend and commander’s frown hammering her own dread into place. Either the guard and priestesses were held captive or were dead; Casmin would never surrender Dامتown to the Kahmudj.

A stone settled in Adita’s belly, guilt adding unbearable weight.

The pieces fell into place.

She remembered the dreams, violent, filled with Zenthe’s screams of sorrow, betrayal, and rage, images of Zenthe’s likeness bloodied and broken, rivers of red, death, the world desolate, gray and decayed.

Her days between had been filled with the summer tributes and celebrations of Zenthe, to reassure the faithful that Zenthe was still with them. Yet each night when Adita sought her bed, well after the zenith of night, exhaustion from the day and wary concern for all those faithful to the goddess were not the sole cause for her unrest and startled spirit.

Adita understood as certain as she breathed, darkness continued to stalk Zenthe, and Adita knew she must discern the source.

Five days.

Five days since she had ordered Kai to send scouts out. Five days since their argument rang off the marble walls, roaring and discordant.

"I am no longer asking, Kai. I am ordering it. Send the scouts." Adita's conviction added a sharp edge to her cold, commanding tone, one she had rarely used with Kai. Adita knew her commander's concerns stemmed from his duty to her safety and the security of the temple. Sending out as many scouts as she demanded would deplete the ranger company to a dangerous level. The rotation of the scouts allowed for four weeks' recuperation before the brave soldiers returned to the territories, men and horses well-rested for another eight weeks of duty. Currently, the company had only two pair of scouts fresh and equipped, the other squads either already on patrol, or too recently returned to be fit for the rigors of ranging.

Five days since Kai rode out with the scouts, his final words to her broaching no disagreement. "I am *not* sending Malen and Tibs back out! They just got back from eight weeks on Jagged Reach. Cres volunteered, and I'm going with him. Jex will command while I'm away." He bowed respectfully to Adita, his gaze filled with questions and disappointment. Sharp words rose to her lips. How could he possibly put himself in such danger? First Casmin, now him? She could not bear the thought of losing Kai as well. Casmin's loss stung almost more than Adita could admit. In the time since she'd learned of Damtown, she

refused to think of him, for she knew to do so would be to see her world turn to dust.

As Kai walked away, Adita closed her eyes, the trill of Zenthe's troubled spirit playing in her blood even as her fear for Kai stabbed at her heart.

She watched him depart, tears tripping over her lashes, splashing onto her cheeks. "May Zenthe keep you safe, Kai," she called after him.

His steps continued to take him from her sight, yet his voice reached her as if he stood beside her on the dais.

"May she keep us all safe."

The door shut behind him, the rattle a thunder of condemnation and finality.

* * * *

Casmin did not feel, did not dream, and when he woke, he found that Elena had moved him to a pallet of leaves and rags. She had bandaged his chest and he had never even sensed her touch. Late afternoon sunlight filtered down through the trees, banding Elena where she sat an arm's reach from him, tending a small, smokeless fire. Two birds, plucked and cleaned, hung spitted over glowing coals, slow roasting and giving off the finest aroma Casmin had ever smelled.

The scent sparked sudden ravening in him, scattering the fog in his head.

"Fate, woman," he said. "You are a miracle."

Elena favored him with a smile, dark eyes appraising him from beneath the tousled black fall of her hair. "I think the miracle is Zenthe's, my captain. She gave you strength to ride."

Casmin pulled himself upright, his chest stiff with the bandages and with the dull ache of his wound, but he knew the scout spoke the truth. Zenthe had kept him from dying and from bloody castration.

He pulled himself toward the fire, his limbs still reluctant. Casmin took a seat beside Elena who sat with her long, bare legs folded beneath her. She had opened her leather vest to the waist so the black leather scarcely covered the swelling of her breasts.

Elena laughed a sound like subtle chimes. "Truly you are Zenthe's soldier," she said, feeling the heat of his gaze. "Hardly alive, yet ready for a tumble."

Casmin laughed a little too, though his chest protested the effort. "I believe you are safe, Elena. If you run, I have no hope of catching you."

"Eat," she said, pointing to the birds. "Then you will have strength to chase me."

Doves yield tender and flavorful meat under the most commonplace of circumstances, but, in the fading light of a summer day, half-starved, Casmin had never tasted so fine a dish. He ate like

a wolf, devouring both of the birds while Elena watched him.

Then, ashamed, he held up a stripped breastbone like self-damning evidence. "You did not eat."

"In the village," she chuckled. "I did earlier. The people there already have word of the ceremony and of the Kahmudjans. I did not get the sense that anyone is looking for you, for us. We may be safe upon the road, at least for another day."

"What happened?" Casmin asked, curiosity almost the equal to his hunger in need for repast. "Back in Damtown? How did you find me?"

Elena shifted and leaned forward. Her vest opened and Casmin saw one dark nipple. "I followed the ones who carried you back into town," she said. "There was no one else to watch. No one else to save."

He remembered the last glimpse he had seen of Rivah and closed his eyes in the sorrow of her betrayal. He remembered the jarring agony of being dragged through the crowd, trying to hold the rip in his chest together and then darkness until he had awakened in the bathing room, with the butcher.

Casmin breathed deep and felt the tenderness in his chest again. He had to give the Kahmudjan woman some credit. She had done a good job

tending the wound or he would have died. As it was, he felt better practically by the minute.

"I rode down in the river's bed and found an unguarded trail that brought me back up to the road," Elena explained. "Zenthe guided me and I arrived just as the blue robes brought you from the dam. Most of the townsmen were drunk by then and I moved easily among them.

"I found a blue robed bitch all alone and I took her robe."

"And the woman at the house?"

"Yes. Her too. By the time I reached the place where they held you, my first blue robe was . . . not blue any longer."

Casmin did not doubt her. He could not take his eyes from the smooth perfection of her muscled legs, the hard line of her stomach where her vest parted, or that one perfect breast, its nipple sharp and demanding to be bitten.

Elena turned sideways, facing him, her gaze alight with humor.

Casmin eased himself to his knees, reaching for her and then Elena was in his arms and the smokeless fire of their camp turned icy compared to the heat in his cock.

Elena held him and it was as though strength from her flowed into him, so the stiff ache of the wound peeled away, curling into a wisp of nothingness, burned away by desire. Her hands

were tender on his back as he reached under her vest, his thumbs on her astonishing nipples, hard as cherry stones and responsive to his heated touch.

Casmin kissed Elena, and she returned the kiss, but not with the passion he expected.

She pulled away, smiling. "My captain," she said, "I am not for you, and you are not for me."

Silence filled the space between them for less than a heartbeat. Casmin knew the truth of her words even as she drew back from him a little, her hands hot on his chest, her eyes darker than forest shadows, shining with the sunset's fire.

"You learned long ago that not all who serve the goddess wear the priestess' robes. Every woman holds some of her magic."

Casmin smiled as he saw Elena with new eyes. He saw much of Zenthe in this woman and, for a moment, he felt something almost like fear at the proximity of the goddess.

"I have never been with a man, Casmin, or with a woman. I would love for you to be my first lover, but I will remain untouched until Zenthe decrees otherwise. She does not demand chastity of her faithful. I do not hold myself pious. In my heart I have felt that Zenthe would let me know when my fated one was near, and I am waiting for him. He is near, I know, but not now." She smiled again at him, the edgy huntress for an instant

replaced by the perfect maiden. "Not today."

The world hung in perfect stillness.

"Soon, Casmin, you will be with a woman who is your woman, and there will be no others for you then, nor any other man for her, forever.

"Desire and your woman will be one and the same. Together you will be whole."

Elena stood then, ran the fingers of her right hand along the line of Casmin's cheek, and she smiled as she said, "When you are with your lover, Casmin, you must remember this. Make love to her as though that day is the very last day of the world. Worship her and rejoice in the moment you have, that you are with her, before light and love are gone forever."

Breathless, yet filled with a fierce strength, Casmin rose to his feet, awed at the dark perfection of this woman in the fading afternoon light, radiant and beautiful and untouchable, ready to ride behind her toward the temple, to the inferno itself if she asked it. He answered her the only way he could.

"Yes, my goddess. Yes."

* * * *

Kai's footsteps within her chamber eased Adita's soul, even as she knew they heralded ill tidings. She turned from the sunset and walked into the

torch lit room. Kai stood before her, his uniform dusty and wrinkled, his face sunburned and whiskered. But as bedraggled as the commander looked, Adita saw at once that he bore good news. The joy in his face set her heart to racing.

"Your Grace," he said through weather-cracked lips. "He was on the road, near the base of the mountain. He has suffered much, but he will be well."

"Adita, we have found Casmin."

Her heart skipped, a smile turning on her lips as tears threatened to spill. She looked past Kai, eager to see the form of her captain, her spirit soaring at the news. "Where is he, Kai?"

"He's with the healers, but will join us soon." Kai fell silent, placing the wine on the table. "I will leave the telling of his tale to him, but this I will say, Your Grace. We do not have much time."

In the procession of emotions that played upon Kai's face, Adita saw happiness turn to something else.

"The Kahmudjans, Adita," Kai said. "They come as an army, vast as a swarm of locusts. They will be here in a fortnight."

For the first time since she had felt Zenthe's power within her, safe in the certainty of divine power for so many years, Adita felt true fear, for herself, for the goddess.

For the world.

Part 3: The Mountain

Chapter 1

*A*ditā paused at the threshold of the guard's quarter, the massive bronze and brass doors open wide. No guards stood at the entrance, all the men and women of the temple far too busy now to be spared to routine duties. She glanced at the noon sun, squinting against the raging light. The summer had turned brutal, each day seemingly hotter than the one before. No rain had fallen to earth since before Casmin's return, and since his arrival, and the steady gathering of the Kahmudjan multitude, it had been as if Zenthe worked to forge steel from her faithful. Through the blistering days and warm nights, the temple had prepared — fortifying walls, sharpening weapons, mending armor, storing food and water against the siege, and gathering medicinal herbs and agents in the rooms that might become infirmaries or hospitals. Everyone worked far into the night, including Adita. In spite of the Kahmudjan siege, she had spent the last two days with the physicians, as they prepared medicines,

bandages, clean linens, and surgery wards. Even the Great Hall, the very heart of Zenthe's temple, now contained pallets and bedding, the veiled face of the goddess towering over a room that might soon echo with cries and moans of pain rather than ecstasy. Half-exhausted with her work, Adita hoped with all her heart that her planning would be thorough but needless, though the likeliest outcome was that calamity would rain upon them, long before a single drop of water fell from the sky.

She took a deep breath and stepped out of the temple's courtyard into the guard's sanctum. A tickle of excitement touched her spine as she moved along the granite-columned ambulatory, the red sand parade ground at the center of the quarter evenly raked, the neat lines cutting the unmistakable pattern of the guard's insignia.

Adita smiled. Even with all the chaos, the guards continued the tradition of raking the sand after their morning musters. She remembered seeing the insignia from the High Priestess' balcony when she first became the chosen of Zenthe, but that had been long years ago, and Adita had almost forgotten the guard's dedication to that ancient ritual.

And yet, here she was, a priestess — no, the High Priestess — in the quarter. While it was not forbidden for priestesses to enter the quarter, it

was an understood and accepted restriction that the daughters of Zenthe refrained from coming into this place. For reasons of discipline, the quarter embodied the principles that the guard should focus on the responsibilities of their duties without the pleasant distractions of the temple or its servants. Priestesses did not openly enter the quarter, although during ceremonies and high rituals, Adita was certain this unwritten rule would be broken.

Today, she would break the rule herself.

A small breeze wrapped around the ambulatorium, cooling Adita for a moment as she made her way toward the captain's office. She knew she'd hear from Kai and her maidens later about her breach of decorum, but Adita refused to stand on formality at this critical juncture. She needed to speak to Casmin in private and knew he took rest in his quarters. For nearly three days Casmin had stayed on the walls, directing the final fortifications, setting up the watches, preparing for war. Kai had finally ordered the captain relieved and only two hours ago a reluctant Casmin sought his bed.

Casmin had told her, in detail, of his journey to Damtown, of the trap at the dam, the slaughter of his soldiers. Adita ached at the loss of such dedicated men, and when she heard the tale of how close Casmin had come to being gelded, she

knew the Kahmudjans sought to offer a gesture of contempt for the goddess' power. The one detail of his story that she kept returning too though was the woman Elena, the scout who had saved him and brought him back, who had nursed Casmin when fever set in and his wounds festered, who had ultimately brought him back to the mountain. Kai said that Casmin had been alone when the patrol found him, riding upright but dazed, and further, Kai did not know of a woman by that name among the ranks of scouts or rangers.

Yet Casmin said the woman had seemed to bear the favor of Zenthe and he spoke of her in tones of near reverence. The story annoyed Adita a little though she owed deep gratitude to this Elena for all she had done and, more than anything, Adita was reminded of just how little she — the anointed High Priestess — really knew of Zenthe's purpose.

This Elena was a mystery for another day.

Under the care of the temple's physicians and confined initially to the small comfortable hospital ward, Casmin quickly regained his strength. Adita went often to his bedside, showing no more than the proper concern for his rank and place among the guards, but hurting when he hurt, wanting nothing more than to tend him herself, though that duty was denied her now by her station. Within a week, Casmin had improved greatly, in

time for the arrival of the first waves of blue-robed Kahmudjans, mounted on desert horses and armed with the cruel lances of the wasteland tribes and by the time Casmin returned to his command, the azure cavalry had been joined by wave after wave of foot soldiers and tight-packed columns of blue-robed priests and peasants, chanting the name of their god.

The Kahmudj army had met no significant resistance on the road to the temple. Kai and Casmin explained to her that to throw their companies at so large a force would be suicidal, and ultimately useless. The Kahmudj would still reach the mountain, and with fewer temple guards, the blue horde would overthrow Zenthe's sanctuary in little time. Better to fight a defensive battle. On the mountain, Zenthe was far from helpless. They could last for months if need be, and if the Kahmudjans chose an all-out assault, they would be faced with an uphill fight. Sluices and dams had been prepared and with minimal effort, Kai's men cut off the streams that lead down the mountain, effectively stopping the easy source of water for the Kahmudjans.

And boulders would roll easily, lethally downhill.

Adita paused outside the door marked as Casmin's quarters. She took the handle in hand, her stomach knotting as she did. She could have

sent for him, yes, could have summoned him like the servant of Zenthe that he was, but Adita wanted to meet him in his own place, not as his commander and mistress, but as his friend. She needed him to herself, if only for a few moments.

The time for such luxury might never come again.

She knocked twice, the sounds booming in her chest, yet she knew her rapping was light. No voice answered, only her blood rushing to her ears. Breath held, she pushed on the handle, her heart jumping at the click of the latch as the door swung open on well-oiled hinges.

Casmin's even breathing reached her from some unknown area of the room. She looked around almost ashamed, as if she walked into a sacred space without permission. Her captain's quarters appeared neat and orderly, the only chaos being the large desk where maps and reports, quills and tools covered the surface in mild disarray. Bookshelves held volumes bound in leather and more exotic materials. Modest, beautifully woven tapestries covered the walls, the product of his home region of Margate. Animal rugs spotted the shining wooden floor and three large wardrobes stood sentry against the walls, their dark grain and gleaming brass accents exuding masculinity. A rush of curiosity filled her. She envisioned herself snooping, looking in the

wardrobes, admiring the titles of the books, studying the stories woven into the tapestries, and, though such an adventure was little more than fantasy, she wanted to know everything about the man asleep in the room.

Everything.

She stifled her curiosity and approached the bed. Humble in appearance the heavy wooden frame cradled a large, thick mattress and, upon it Casmin's sleeping form sprawled. At the foot of the bed, the coverlet folded back, the heat of the day too much for so thick a blanket, so that only a linen sheet covered him.

Or rather half-covered him. Adita froze as she stared at her captain, his well muscled legs extending beyond the narrow gathering of the sheet, the material covering his groin, though only barely. She found her feet again, as she slowly released the breath she didn't realize she'd been holding. She reached for the foot poster of the bed, leaning on the thick wood to support her body suddenly betrayed by weak knees.

Her eyes traveled above the sheet, marveling at his flat stomach and broad shoulders, at the dark hair that accented his chest. Bruises and healing cuts broke the perfection of his skin, but even with the scars Adita had never seen a more handsome man.

She took strength from the ancient wood of the

bed and moved closer to Casmin. Transfixed, she lowered herself onto the edge of the mattress, her thigh warmed by the heat of his chest. Deep within her center, a fire long thought extinct kindled, the smallest spark given life in the span of a heartbeat.

Adita's gaze rose to Casmin's face. He slept deeply, unaware of her presence. Black hair mussed by sleep and a light shade of beard growth enhanced his appearance. His knitted brow betrayed the concern he carried with him into dreams. Without hesitation, she reached up, her fingers light upon his forehead, eager to smooth the worry from his handsome face.

Casmin's eyes opened, dark pools unfocused at first, then clear as water as he stared at her candidly, as if she belonged there.

"Casmin," Adita whispered, electricity lanced her center as he stared at her.

"Your grace," he answered, reverence ever present in his tone.

"We — we've had news." She pulled her hand away from his brow, the moment broken. She straightened her back and folded her hands in her lap. She looked at him as if it were perfectly natural for her to be there.

Casmin slowly pushed himself up, his gaze burning Adita with its intensity until she looked away from him and to her hands.

"What news?" He asked, his voice slightly graveled from sleep.

"The Kahmudjans sent a messenger, and with him three of the priestesses taken in Damtown."

Casmin's silence drew her gaze. "They're safe, Casmin."

Casmin leaned back against the headboard of the bed, his eyes closing for a moment. "Only three?"

Adita nodded, the ache in her soul echoing in her words. "Yes. The First Priestess was not among them."

"I am not surprised, your grace, and I suspect, neither are you." Silence filled the space between them. "What message did they send?"

"The leader of the Kahmudjans wishes a meeting to discuss a solution to the conflict."

"The solution is easy, your grace. They need to leave." Venom laced his words.

"I agree, but I somehow doubt they marched across Corsinium only to leave after having tea."

"Sul Tarkus?"

"Yes, that is the man whose name appeared on the scroll."

Casmin nodded, his gaze a storm of conflict. "Then we will meet him. Kai and I will arrange—"

"No, Casmin." Adita shook her head slowly, her gaze falling to her hands again only to be drawn to the dark thatch of hair now exposed by

Casmin's shift in position in the bed. She stared, her cheeks and her core suddenly gone warm. An unmistakable movement shifted the sheet across Casmin's waist, and Adita stopped breathing as insane hope gave birth to her wish for a glimpse of Casmin's cock.

"No?" Casmin asked, incredulous, bolting Adita back to her purpose.

"No, Casmin. Sul Tarkus wishes to meet with me alone."

Tension blew the moment to shreds. Casmin gripped the sheet in his hands and tore it from across his waist as he moved away from her, off the far side of the bed. "Absolutely not! If Sul Tarkus wants to discuss terms, he will only meet you with me and Kai in attendance!"

Adita heard the rustle of clothing behind her and she regretted the lost intimacy they had shared only seconds before. She rose from the bed, the mantle of her position again firmly in place.

"This is not open for discussion, Casmin."

He stared at her, his trousers up over his hips, the lacings still open. "And Kai is in agreement with your decision?"

"He is not," Adita conceded.

Casmin came from around the bed, his face a storm. Strong hands closed on Adita's arms, the shock of his touch adding heat to her blood.

"You cannot do this, Adita. Sul Tarkus means

you great harm. You cannot be alone with him."

Adita swam between desire and duty. She longed to press against Casmin and take solace in the circle of his arms. She'd always found comfort with him, always found peace, and now against all convention and covenant, she added lust to the mix.

"I cannot allow it, your grace."

Adita stiffened, shrugging off Casmin's hands. "Allow? Casmin, I am not some flower that once touched, withers and dies. I am the High Priestess of Zenthe. I have made my decision, Captain, and it will be done."

She turned from him and walked to the door. There she stopped and turned, facing him, with the weight of her responsibility coating every word.

"I will meet with Sul Tarkus alone, Captain. Please see he is brought to the Needle."

She turned and opened the door, Casmin's strained voice drove nails through her soul. "As you wish, your grace. The goddess' will is as my own."

Adita knew that Casmin lied, but she forgave him.

He was her soldier. He would perform his duty. As would they all.

Chapter 2

Legends said that far beyond the wastelands, at the very end of the River Bliss's course, lay water vaster than the world, an endless track of shining blue. Only a few men and women had ever returned from that precipice where land met ocean, but Sul Tarkus had heard their tales and he had imagined what wonders they had seen. Below him now, he gazed upon a sight more amazing than the sea, blue silk to the horizon, drowning the stones, the trees, the green fields and the flows of cold black rock that spread away from the mountain like spokes around the wheel of destiny.

The ocean had come to Zenthe's mountain.

His ocean.

"So shall it always be," Sul Tarkus said to Selete and the six other acolytes who sat around him on the immense, flat rock where they had paused beside the wide, paved road that led the final distance to the high temple of the goddess. "As darkness devours the day, as the sea washes away

the shore, so Kahmudj will come to Zenthe.

“So man shall ever come to woman, as lord and conqueror.”

Kahmudj burned inside Sul, brighter than the summer sun that hung near the zenith of the azure sky, blue as the silken tents and pavilions of the multitude, so that heaven and the valley below seemed but mirrors reflecting the endless truth of Kahmudj.

Sul Tarkus’ chest gleamed with sweat in the moist heat. He wore only loose trousers, dyed with his god’s cerulean hue and sandals made of the softest leather. The dark mane of his hair had been combed and perfumed with musk and his chest and loins rubbed with the oil of a desert flower so that Sul Tarkus’ skin glowed and burned from within. His cock lay long and heavy within his pants, half erect and tireless.

“So many have gathered,” one of the acolytes said as he stared, calculating, at the blue horde surrounding them. “Why do we not simply march on the temple and take all that our lord is due?”

Sul looked upon the man, a pale Sarwegan, who had, only a week ago been the wealthiest merchant in his valley, before Kahmudj called him to serve.

“Kahmudj demands submission,” Sul replied quietly. “The Rite of Renewal must be performed so that Zenthe’s screams of pleasure become

paeans to his name."

Selete looked away, her eyes downcast. Sul stroked her shining honey-colored hair, the radiance of noon turning her almost ethereal. He smiled, understanding her sullenness. Even on the rim of transcendence, at the end of an era, jealousy kept its home in a woman's heart.

Sul leaned close to her, his lips warm against her ear. "I will still be your lover, Selete," Sul Tarkus reassured her. "You will never want.." *Perhaps my words might even be true*, Sul mused. In the short time he and Selete had shared a life, her faith, obedience, and devotion to Kahmudj daily reinforced Sul's choice in companions. The priestess Rivah had become one of his most zealous followers, and her body had no match in bed, all the training of her temple years seasoning for the richest of feasts, but Selete shone as an example of the perfect woman. She was who Sul Tarkus sought most often, sometimes for passion and sometimes only for the circle of her arms in the night.

Sul held no illusions and openly questioned his future. Would he still cherish Selete once he had known the love of the High Priestess, when Kahmudj dwelled in him forever? He felt the imminence of immortality assured by the sweat he would drink from Adita's shoulder, salty between his teeth, by the running juice from her cunt,

bathing him in the baptism of divinity.

Kahmudj reborn in the moment of her ecstasy.

Sul Tarkus gestured to his followers, bidding them rise, then turned to resume the climb up the wide road to the temple. When the first teeming columns of the faithful had arrived at the mountain, brief skirmishes accented the days. In time, a zone longer than an arrow's flight had been established between the blue tents and the alabaster walls and Sul Tarkus knew that in these last hundred paces he risked an archer's shot, a flung stone, if even a single soldier of the goddess dared.

But Sul Tarkus did not fear. Kahmudj shielded him, and even the most devout follower of the doomed goddess must recognize that Sul Tarkus would be the new lord of the temple, a conqueror without battle. He trusted the assurance made by the High Priestess herself that he would be received in the temple and given an audience alone with her, that the Rite of Renewal might be arranged with her.

Rivah's extensive knowledge of the temple's rites had proven most useful. For days, between rounds of frenzied fucking, Sul pelted the insatiable priestess with questions, and Rivah gladly revealed all she knew. Sul did not fail to notice the malicious glint in the redhead's eyes when she regaled him with her account of the last

time the rite had been performed, when the Hawk tried to climb the dome of heaven and failed. Rivah knew the order of the matings that Sul must pass through, acolyte to priestess to first priestess, bringing each to blissful climax, judged by women whose lives had been given to pleasure.

Sul would take each of them in turn, if he must, plow each furrow deep and hard, the relentless silken fire of Kahmudj flowing through him, pounding, tireless and merciless, even when the heat of orgasm became unbearable.

If Sul Tarkus must, he would fuck them all to death, and then take the High Priestess on the pile of sated, smiling corpses.

For now, Sul kept his gaze on the portal before him. In the most recent days of the siege, a trickle of people fled the temple, servants and guards mostly, tentative in their approach as they sought mercy from the blue horde below, so he knew from the defectors that the wide gates that stood open before him now had until recently been barred and defended. Fitting, he thought, that the goddess should open to me. He did not glance to his right or left as he passed through the gates, hardly marking the golden-armored soldiers who watched him pass with eyes like angry, envious wolves.

The courtyard stretched before him, shimmering with waves of heat, empty save for a

tight knot of guards and a priestess who might have been as old as the mountain. Sul hoped she was not one of the ones he must fuck.

A tall, thin man, grizzled of hair and graced with the face of an aging cherub, bowed very slightly to Sul Tarkus. "My lord, my lady Adita, the High Priestess of Zenthe, awaits you at the top of the Needle." He indicated a cart of shining gold, drawn by two massive men, naked save for golden sashes across their chests. The cherub glanced at the others behind Sul. "We will see that your folk are not bored, sir."

Sul smiled the briefest of smiles at Selete and dismissed the others with a wave of his hand. He settled into the little cart and leaned back, watching the broad muscles of the men's backs as they pulled him toward his destiny.

Across a seemingly endless expanse of white stone they carried him, their breath keeping time with the pad of their sandaled feet on the dusty ground. Sul Tarkus glanced back over his shoulder and saw the seven blue shapes of his followers, tiny and distant, golden servants with trays of refreshments approaching from one of the blinding white buildings. The beauty and certainty of his mission bloomed before him like the opening flower of the burning sun, gold turning azure in the garden of his future.

Kahmudj stretched within him, eager to be

born.

Between the jogging hunks of muscle that bunched on the servants' backs, Sul Tarkus admired the path they followed as it led up a curving way. A slow circling of an immense pillar of white brickwork, the graceful spiral rising above the courtyard, tall and vast as the largest of the temples, its peak hidden behind the swelling, latticed contour of its slope. The pair of goliaths who drew the cart did not miss a step, even as the road rose sharply, ascending the spiral toward the prick of the Needle.

As he rounded the enormous brickwork tower, Sul Tarkus saw the panorama of Zenthe's temple pass before him in a ring of beauty, alabaster spires and mammoth arches, the up reach of ancient stone against the summer sky, chalk-pale streaked with shimmering gold and silver, harvesting the fire of the sun and reflecting it. Then they rounded a curve and he saw, far below but heart-freezing near, the gulf of the mountain's mouth, a pit of smoldering blackness and, beside it, dammed by walls of glittering, glass-flecked stone, the expanse of crystalline water that filled most of the cauldron, reflecting the white city and the dancing fire of the sun, Zenthe's Mirror.

And then the road spiraled once more and Sul Tarkus saw that he had reached the summit, a flat space no more than twenty paces on a side. The

stones here were honed of gold-flecked marble, so fine and polished that they seemed to be a surface of light. Besides the cart and the human oxen that drew it, Sul saw only one figure awaited him on top the Needle. He squinted against the relentless, white glare, slivers of gold and ivory, but there in a shadow, he saw the shape of desire itself.

The cart stopped and Sul Tarkus stepped down onto the marble, his gaze fixed on the figure awaiting him. The servants wheeled away, silent in their retreat back down the spiraling path.

The shimmering form approached and resolved itself into smooth, pale arms and a golden, sleeveless robe, draping modestly the form of Adita, the High Priestess of Zenthe.

The faintest breeze stirred the fine white dust of the pinnacle and Sul listened and looked about. He and the priestess were truly alone.

"Who are you?" she asked, in a voice of disinterest. "Who comes to disappoint a goddess?"

He laughed. "You know my name," he smiled, amused by her attempt to put him on the defensive. "You have known it since long before the mountain rose. You spoke it when you served me. You cried it when I fucked you at the birth of time."

Adita answered his laugh with her own. She strolled toward him, casually swaying her hips so

the golden robe danced like flames in the waving heat. "I have known many lovers, sir, but I do not remember your face, or your name. Refresh me."

Sul grinned. "I am Kahmudj." He saw that the thin fabric dripped with the same sweat that beaded her neck and slicked the tips of her flowing blonde hair against her cheeks and brow, so the sheen lay against her breasts like a film of gold, giving her a shining aura and concealing nothing of her beauty.

"Kahmudj," she said her voice confident. "I was told Sul Tarkus would join me here."

Sul half bowed, the sound of his name on her lips firing the blood in his veins.

"You would come to meet the challenge of the Rite of Renewal?" She asked in a whisper.

"I do. The Rite is my destiny. Kahmudj will take his rightful place as your master."

"Zenthe has no master," Adita answered with quiet authority.

"And that, my lady, is why Zenthe has faltered. She has forgotten her rightful place — at the feet and in the bed of Kahmudj."

Adita fell silent, her gaze turning west, blue sky reflecting in her eyes.

"There are traditions, sir, progression along the path," she said, her statement unfinished as she slowly stepped toward him, her gaze still locked on the heavens.

"But I know you have already tasted of my priestesses. The three you returned spoke of your skill. And of course, Rivah."

"Your First Priestess is safe in the camp," Sul offered.

"I know," Adita looked at him. "She is safe, and she is yours." Adita continued toward him.

"I am the High Priestess, it is within my right to allow you to proceed with the Rite of Renewal, if I so choose."

She stopped within arm's reach and Sul Tarkus felt the heat of her, hotter than the noon sun on the radiant stones. He smelled her sweat like honey and roses, tasted her on the heavy air, salt still on his lips from when he had buried his tongue in her cunt so many ages ago. She would not look at him, her eyes cast down and he stepped closer and caught her wrist in his hand, circling it, insistent.

He realized then that she held a bottle in her hand, a bulbous shape of golden glass, as though she held the egg of the sun between them, and Adita raised her gaze to meet his, eyes green as valley fields, alight with golden sparks, like precious coins scattered across the sward.

She put the bottle to her lips and drank slowly, reveling in the wine, a line of rose wetting her lips, gathering at the corner of her perfect mouth. She held the bottle out to him, her eyes filled with desire and darker things. Sul took it from her and

drank. He tasted the high mountains and the desert at night, the chill of first frost and endless rime, the finger of some all-powerful god of the snows pressed against his heart and in the burning inferno of noon, Sul Tarkus shivered.

"Zenthe's Chill," the High Priestess whispered. "Made from grapes that grow in a single vineyard in the entire world. It's located within the rim of the crater here. The wine eases the heat of summer but does not touch the fever of desire. Do you feel it?"

"Aye," replied Sul Tarkus, his voice tight. His cock stirred against his leg, pressing against the loose blue pants he wore and he knew the truth of her words.

Adita's gaze moved down, her vision fixed on the movement in his pants, and she smiled. For a heartbeat she became a coquette of some lowland village, and Sul Tarkus saw the moment in the planting season, a swain of the fertile valley, a maiden in the cornfield, Zenthe's mystery between them, and all the hope of the world in their sudden lust. His breath grew harsh in his throat and the words he had brought with him, the demands and the promises — not all of them threats — fell away and he was left with only the aching rush of craving.

The golden robe disappeared like mist as he tore it away with a growl. Adita, High Priestess of

Zenthe, pressed her hard breasts against his bare chest, sweat slick, nipples stiff as fingers, his hands on her back and bottom, drinking in the amazing heat of her, the wine coursing through his body, the bottle cast aside, shattering on the stone in a skim of frost that burned at once to steam.

She pitched against him, but Sul could not tell whether it was from dread or passion. Her struggles added more heat to their bodies and Sul did not care about the nature of her squirming, nor did it matter, for he would have her, this goddess, this woman, here. He would fuck her until she cried out his name again, worshipful, reverent, and conquered.

With one hand, Sul Tarkus held both Adita's wrists behind her. She writhed naked, her belly pressed to his and the wide, thick length of his cock rose as though trying to split the silken fabric of his trousers. With his free hand he tore at the waistband and pulled his length free, sliding the pants down his legs.

The sword of Kahmudj, the unsheathed, veined splendor of it, would have brought cries of pleasure from the most jaded whores of Bethemet's slums, and Sul marveled at the power of Kahmudj within him now, unlike any other moment he had ever known. His prick, almost as long as his forearm, thick and fat-headed, jutted

out from his groin, the sword of eons' destiny within it, pulsing, ripe unto bursting to fulfill this last great act to bring Kahmudj to full glory.

Adita's breath raged as he released her hands and caught her around the waist. Her struggles vanished, somewhat to his disappointment, and instead her fingers drew shapes on his bare chest. She looked up at him, her green eyes dancing with wicked anticipation. Sul gripped her tight around the waist and lifted her, holding her just above the hard, pulsing slab of his cock, savoring the moment when he would penetrate her, to feel the very core of the goddess break beneath him, to work in her and spend himself deep and endlessly in the very heart of her being.

His heart jumped and the noonday heat made a wavering curtain of his vision. A voice, familiar as breath, whispered. Kahmudj. It must be Kahmudj, for no other voice ever spoke within him.

"What if you fail?"

As if stricken by a bolt of ice, Sul stopped. In his inner vision, the smoldering mouth of the mountain loomed, a black pit that a man might vanish into, oblivion and a memory of a fall, all the way out of heaven and into the flesh of a man.

His tongue dried in his mouth, his heart fluttered more with fear than lust. Sul Tarkus knew the immensity of the goddess, her power and her majesty, and his cock quivered and

sagged against his thigh.

Adita held her head high, her gaze a storm of divine outrage and fathomless intuition, the slightest hint of a smile upon her lips. He set her down and stepped back, his breath finally finding release from his lungs. She wrapped her arms around the impossible naked beauty of her body, and hugged herself. Sul Tarkus stepped back, unable to tear his gaze from the woman before him, unable to reconcile the staggering weight of the moment.

And all the while she watched him with eyes the color of springtime, an expression upon her divine face that might even have been pity.

* * * *

Casmin's heart hardly beat and his breath burned in his chest hot as the sun that pinned his shadow to the courtyard stones.

He waited at the head of fifty soldiers, too far from the shining spiral of stone where Adita and Sul Tarkus stood, shimmering figures in the noontime fire, held at bay by Adita's order, by Zenthe's will and her strength.

But when Casmin saw Sul Tarkus' violent motion atop the tower, saw the Kahmudjan lunge at the priestess, the golden ruin of her garment like a sudden flame torn aside, his legs began to

pound, against his will, against the command of Zenthe and he ran hard, steel steps on the hot, flat stones, rage the fuel that powered his charge.

Too late, he knew, whatever might have happened. Sul would have his chance at divinity long before Casmin might reach Adita's side, to spare her pain or ecstasy, to save the world from Zenthe's wrath or from the fierce manifestation of her pleasure.

Casmin feared both equally.

His men stood confused behind him for a moment then they ran too, scattered golden sprinters on the merciless plain, no order to their charge, only desperation. Panting, sweat flowing like water from his plastered hair, chill beneath his golden leather tunic, Casmin arrived at the base of the tower and started up the spiraling way, stopped short, hand on the hilt of his sword, a snarl curling his lips.

Sul Tarkus trudged along the wide white pathway, his eyes cast down, the dark mane of his hair hanging like a veil over his face. His hands hung at his side and he walked as one who had lost all hope.

Casmin drew his blade and raised it, uncertain of what he witnessed, wanting only the death of this man who had humiliated him in Damtown and who had assaulted his priestess.

The man who had laid a hand on the woman

Casmin loved.

Sul Tarkus seemed beyond defending himself, as though the most basic elements of life had been drained from him and Casmin's blade hung like a ray of purification over the damned shape of Sul Tarkus, but the blinding light of vengeance was suddenly eclipsed by a shadow of mercy.

"No, Casmin." The chime of Adita's voice drew his attention. He looked up to see her descending the path, a dozen paces behind the shambling figure of the Kahmudjan.

Gloriously naked, the golden daylight painted the curves of her breasts and hips. Sweat gleamed on her perfect body and Casmin's lips parted in a silent prayer to the beauty of Zenthe unveiled, the upraised sword suddenly meaningless before the power of the goddess.

Sul Tarkus passed by Casmin, looking neither to the left nor the right, and the scattered legion that had followed Casmin parted before the priest, allowing him to make the long trek across the shining courtyard, his shadow running before him like a herald to bear the news of his disgrace. Casmin turned back to Adita who stood beside him now, her hand stroking his forearm, magic in her fingertips, turning his blood to fire, filling his soul with the majesty of her power and the pure fever of desire, man for woman.

"What happens now?" he asked her,

breathlessly.

And she turned her gaze from the departing shape of the Kahmudjan, her eyes filled with emotions Casmin could not read as she answered him.

“Whatsoever Zenthe wills.”

Chapter 3

Shadows played against the undulating walls of Sul's tent as Rivah paced within. The blue cloth walls provided some cover from the sun but did little to ease the heat of the day, or to bring her temper down.

Sul left her. He left her to go to *that* bitch. Rivah ground her teeth in frustration, her grand vision of triumph over Adita as inconsequential now as the dust that whirled on the road leading to the temple.

The entire trip from Damtown to the mountain, Rivah had capitulated to Sul, answered every one of his questions, fucked him and was fucked by him until she thought she could not take another thrust. Certainly, she had enjoyed every moment, and she knew that, in some ways, Sul was only using her, but that sword always had two edges. She let him sink his prick into Selete too. Rivah understood man's instinct to conquer and

dominate. Selete's simple upbringing made her a perfect foil. Rivah had already begun to whittle away the older woman's reservations towards her. In little time, she and the simple cow would be fucking Sul in tandem until Rivah's control of Sul was firmly in place.

Rivah paced to the front of the tent and threw the flap back, exposing the temple road to her view.

The fucking prick. Rivah had recognized the spark in his eyes when he told her he would see Adita alone and that she was not to be among those who accompanied him into the temple. Selete would be, the cow, but not her.

"Your presence would be disruptive, Rivah," Sul said. "You were their First Priestess. Your presence at this meeting would either be insulting or taken as arrogance, and I do not intend to provoke violence if it can be avoided. Kahmudj wants his faithful alive to see his greater glory. War is a last resort."

Rivah just stared at him, her rage rising dangerously close to the surface. She glared into his face, the heat of his body failing to stir passion in her, only more fury. And then, in his eyes she saw the light and knew his true purpose.

Without hesitation, she pulled back her arm and slapped him across the face with all the force she could muster.

"You bastard, don't you dare! Don't you dare fall in love with some ideal vision of the two of you — you and that whore of a priestess! Adita must pay for her insolence and insults. Go and fuck her, make her scream until the mountains keened from it, but do not doubt for an instant that the minute you've gained your prize that the bitch shouldn't be cast down with the pigs!"

Rivah pulled her hand back again, ready to drive her point home, but Sul grabbed her arms and shook her until her vision blurred.

"Do not dare assume my intentions, Rivah," he growled at her. "I am Kahmudj and his will be done. And never forget, I can snap your neck as easily as kiss you." He stopped shaking her, his grip sinking into her arms. "You will stay here for now. Do not disappoint me and try to follow. Once my ascension is complete, I will send for you. You will enter the temple again, Rivah, and when you do, your fellow sisters will bow to your authority. This I promise."

Sul kissed her, bruising, deep, his tongue plunging into her mouth, taking, tasting. Her anger melted away into desire. She leaned into him, her tongue equal to the duel, her hands roaming freely over his back and sides. He pulled away, released her and stalked out of the tent before she could say another word.

The sun had not yet breached the mountain as

Sul and the knot of followers headed up the wide pathway to the temple. Rivah kept an eye on the mountain as the light of heaven crawled to its burning summit, then beyond it. When the sun began its decline into the west, shadows cast by the tents and idle men grew like twisted reeds until rushes of darkness covered every inch of ground.

A murmur from the edge of the vast camp was the first herald of Sul's return and Rivah followed the sound.

He walked alone, with Selete and the others a fair distance behind. Rivah waited at the opening of his tent, her hand shading her gaze from the heat and fading light of the falling sun, and she watched, the slightest smile playing on her lips.

The bitch had turned him out.

Rivah slipped back into the tent, running her fingers through her hair, removing the rope belt that held her robe closed, her bare body beneath concealed only if she stood still. She poured a goblet of wine and one of water and set them on the small table near the center post of the tent. Placing herself to the left, Rivah waited, her soul strangely serene.

Murmurs and beehive activity grew louder every moment until distinguishable voices announced Sul's imminent arrival.

His shadow turned the entrance charcoal.

"Have my captains here in thirty minutes," He growled before casting the flap aside and entering the tent.

Rivah looked at him calmly, her brow arching ever so slightly as she waited for him to speak.

Maelstroms swirled in his gaze and never had Rivah seen such a cruel cut replace a man's smile.

Darkest malevolence bubbled to the surface. "I gather things did not go...according to plan." Rivah commented, her tone a butterfly's breath from sarcastic.

Sul stared at her, the storms of fury sweeping through him.

Rivah sighed dramatically and reached for the wine and water goblets. Two steps put her in front of him her robe open in the front to the ground, her right breast exposed to his hate-filled gaze. She lifted the goblets to him, offering him each.

Sul snatched the wine from her, downing the contents in two massive gulps.

Rivah held the water goblet between her two hands, looking into the clear liquid. "Did you see her?"

"Yes," Sul ground out, then stepped around her to plant his hands on the small table, his head hanging down between his outstretched arms.

Rivah turned completely, her back to the tent opening. "I warned you," Rivah spat, her ire rising quickly. "I told you not to idealize, not to make

this into anything more than bedding the bitch! You didn't heed me, did you? You stood before her and saw the *goddess*."

"Rivah..." Sul growled.

"You saw her and instead of keeping your focus on *just fucking her*, you let the bitch inside your head." Rivah scoffed. "You're no better than the other idiots who have tried the rite. The only difference is..." Rivah paused, realization adding to her irritation.

"You didn't even get so far as to put your prick in her!" Rivah giggled, madness almost claiming her senses completely.

Sul's fingers curled around the edge of the table, his knuckles bleeding to white bone. The table started to rattle as Sul's body shook.

"She sits in her temple every bit the goddess you have made her and what about you?" Rivah's voice dripped contempt. "You left here imperial and you return, not as a god, but just a man." Rivah threw the water at Sul's quivering back, tossing the goblet past his head as Sul suddenly turned on her, his face a mask of fury. "A man who has failed."

Rivah dodged his lunge, but, off balance, found herself caught, his hands squeezing her arms so tightly the bones felt close to breaking. Sul held her so that she faced him, her feet off the ground. He slammed her back against the center post, her

spine bruising from the abuse, the air in her lungs suddenly gone.

He pushed on her upper arms, as if he meant to wrap her around the post, her shoulders a breath away from tearing.

She gasped for air but blind rage outweighed common sense. "Kill me Sul, go ahead! My death won't change the fact that you failed! You fucking failed to take that bitch down!"

Sul stared at her, hatred turning his expression wild. He pushed against her, driving her shoulders into the post and Rivah loosed a scream as her shoulders reached their maximum span, her wrath suddenly turned to fear.

A cry from the doorway of the tent shattered the moment. "My Lord! My Lord! Let her go!"

Rivah turned at the imploring voice, shocked by both its source and the sudden nothingness beneath her as Sul did as commanded.

Falling to the ground, released, Rivah stared at Selete, as the small woman pulled Sul away from her.

With effort Rivah sat up, her back and shoulders ravaging plains of pain. Sul looked at her, his gaze less mad, his composure slowly returning, Selete at his side, whispering, stroking, as if she gentled a beast in some forbidden wood.

Sul looked at Rivah, his gaze as cold as deep winter ice. "You're right Rivah, your death won't

change what happened, but mark my words, that bitch, as you call her, will be broken."

Sul went to the tent opening, tossing the flap to expose Rivah to the awkward gaze of dozens of men and woman encircling the opening, a human gate that kept the sea of followers from flooding over her.

Sul's voice boomed like dark thunder. "Zenthe refuses her Lord! Such insolence must be punished!" Cheers began to roll through the crowd, but Sul's voice rose above them all.

"Form ranks," he cried, imperious, ringing, the voice of the ocean. "Follow your commanders and take the temple. Make this night the night of Kahmudj!

"By dawn the mountain will be ours."

* * * *

Casmin, fully armored in tight bands of gold, and Adita, dressed now in a lightweight cotton robe the color of sunrise, watched from atop the temple gate. The scattered, distant blue figures of Sul Tarkus and his acolytes made their way down the trail, then vanished into the rippling sea of tents, like droplets of water running back into the ocean.

As the setting sun slowly turned the Kahmudjan tents to shadows, rippling darkness ran among the forests and lava flows that covered

the lower slopes. The priests and their vast army of followers chanted and angry cries echoed high upon the mountain. The war whoops and bellows of the wastelands edged the sunset with promises of undeniable violence. Casmin heard the rising currents of noise ascending the mountain. The enormous gate beneath his feet ground shut as lines of golden soldiers, under Kai's command, formed ranks along the sun-flamed alabaster walls that stretched north and south.

The noise below surged, a rumble deep as the stones, as if Zenthe's voice might be speaking from the heart of the mountain. Adita laid her warm hand on Casmin's and he turned to her, her eyes luminous in the fading golden light.

"The world is ending, my captain," Adita said, her voice calm and controlled. "Whatever befalls this night, nothing will ever be the same again."

"We will fight, Adita. We will prevail."

"Perhaps," she whispered. She closed her eyes for a moment, and when she opened them, hope surfaced in the magical green pools. "Zenthe watches us and though she has not revealed to me her plan, I cannot believe she means the temple to fall."

Her fingers curled around his hand and the slightest tremble brushed his skin as she squeezed. Her gaze lingered on his for a long moment and then she turned away. "I am going into the

Chamber of Union. The wounded are to be brought there and I will aid in their care." Her eyes caressed his soul, their depths leaving his heart beating harder and faster even than the threat of battle. Before he could say another word, she slipped away, her perfect figure melting into the fading day.

As the sun crept down the western sky, a line of shadow rose up the broken ground of the slope. The cries and rhythmic shouting from the Kahmudjan camp grew louder so that it seemed the rising darkness had a voice, chanting the praises of the god who had come to end all things. Casmin knew Kai's soldiers were fine men, but they were also soldiers who had never fought a war, warriors trained in arms, but untested save by unruly temple guests and the occasional bandit nuisance.

"Watch," Casmin commanded the lieutenant whose company guarded the top of the gate, "and send word to the commander as soon as they move." Casmin turned and followed Adita's path. He fought the temptation to go to her in the great hall, so often given to the wildest acts of love and pleasure, now readied as a room to receive agony and death.

No, he thought. Nothing will ever be the same.

Casmin walked north below the parapets lined with men in golden leather and bands of steel,

bows ready, smoldering pots of pitch and oil ranged along the way, the rich stink of tar almost blinding in the dying heat of the day. A hundred paces along the wall and Casmin heard a sudden clattering of arrows on stone, saw the thin line of one catch the fading sun and fall well into the courtyard. The soldiers along that section of wall returned the fire and Casmin heard scattered cries of alarm and pain from the tiny force of Kahmudjans that had assaulted the wall. Soon darkness would make arrows entirely useless and perhaps the Kahmudjans would hold their attack until dawn. In truth, neither side would fight well in the darkness, but Casmin suspected such consideration held no weight against Sul Tarkus' rage and his desire to see the temple fall.

Satisfied that the first attack had been repulsed, Casmin hurried on, almost running. Besides Kai's soldiers, Zenthe had other defenses. The paving stones of the courtyard gave way to hard, black volcanic stone, worn smooth from years of passage, a groove cut into the rock to mark the path. Casmin walked among enormous tumbled rocks that formed a natural wall far higher and more impassable than any of the alabaster barriers raised in Zenthe's name.

This side of the mountain would be safe from assault, and it also held the heart of the goddess' defense, a cave that opened like a red mouth

between two of the mammoth boulders, lit from within with fiery heat, visible now in the fading daylight. The mouth opened into an immense gullet, a parapet of basalt above a wide, oozing river of red fire.

Much of the lava's heat vented upward through gaps in the roof of tumbled stone but enough remained, shaming the summer, slicking the faces and arms of the half dozen men and women who huddled there.

Kai's eyes shone with reflected red flame, his wiry arms jerking with excitement as he listened to the priestess of the mountain's heart, the keeper of ageless secrets of lethal defense.

"My daughters," she said as Casmin entered. "They are here."

Casmin did not see the women at first, then he perceived them as shadows cast by the roiling lava far below, oozing like black ink from the face of the rock, emerging from crevices and cracks that he knew led to secret places on the slopes below. The women were naked and each of them was a wonder to see, the color of ashes, or pumice, of black obsidian, etched in leaf and stone by artists' needles, each of them colored to match the place where they kept vigil upon the mountain, grandmother to mother to daughter, watching for generations against just such a day as this.

One of the women, her skin dyed the color and

texture of weathered wood, spoke, her voice brave and true. "They gather, thick as summer crickets. They mean to come tonight."

"The north-eastern slope," another said, a woman with green cedar woven in her hair and her skin the color of evening shadow. "The attack on the west will be but a feint. They mean to strike where the walls are low and fight their way around the crater's rim."

"I will shift my men," Kai said, but the priestess of the mountain's heart stayed him before he could say more and she spoke softly.

"There is another way," she said.

"Best to be safe," Kai countered, and he addressed Casmin, his tone regretful. "Take the first through eighth squads north and east. Hurry. And tell the men on the west wall to make every blow count."

Casmin turned to go, his mind already busy with the details of how he would gather his troops, which messengers to hold and which to send. He turned to go and realized that the women who were the eyes and ears of Zenthe had already vanished again, like shadows into the stone, as though they had never been in the cave at all.

He walked out into the deep purple of dusk and, in a break between the massive boulders, Casmin saw the lower slopes of the mountain

dotted with points of light that crept and pooled, forming lines that he knew showed only what the Kahmudjans wished Zenthe's defenders to see.

"Summon the lieutenants," he told an aide. "Tell them to hasten their troops to the northeastern parapet and meet me at the Tower of Ice," then he ran, golden armor singing, weaving through the pathways cut into the mountain's skin, then among the alabaster halls, the last of their radiance turned to shadows and purple ash.

He reached the Tower of Ice, rising like a huge, broken lance above the northeastern rim of the cauldron, well ahead of his men. A thin line of soldiers already waited, and he recognized them as the standing guard for the section of wall. Casmin climbed the winding steps to the first level of the tower, peering out through the wide gaps in the stone walls. In winter, exposure to the north wind and the careful ministrations of priestesses would fill the gaps with ice for almost three months of the year but here, in the heat of a summer night, Casmin's view of the northeastern slope of the mountain and the temple's defenses was wide and clear.

He saw the approach of his men, the first through eighth, each squad marked by a brazier, drawn by hooded horses, each moving flame distinctly colored by crystals from the mountain's heart, so that each squad might rally to its own

hue, battle standards even in darkness. Westward and south, lurid light, like the edge of sunset, leaked up from the crater, turning Zenthe's Mirror to a lake of blood.

His squads had not formed and only two of the lieutenants had arrived when the first clash of metal rang from the walls. From Casmin's view, the rocky slopes below the temple lay in total darkness, but following the sounds he saw firelight illuminating the first assailants as they tried to crest the white stones.

"Thousands of them," a breathless messenger called from the base of the tower, relaying word from the front. "Already thousands of them."

The squads arrived, orderly but late, and the line of battle atop the wall swarmed black and chaotic in the dancing lights. As the rolling braziers drew up, red and blue flames painted a phantasmagoria of desperate slaughter.

"Hold," Casmin told each of his officers in turn. "Hold at all costs." He yearned to go with them, to the walls, but for now, his place was here, watching, ready to send word to Kai if the wall was breached, or if the defense became impossible.

The Kahmudjans threw ladders against the parapets, dozens of them it seemed, while archers on the ground below fired at the backlit defenders on the wall. Casmin heard the ringing blows of

massive hammers tearing at the wall and he knew that rams would soon be brought to bear against the narrow iron gates. Further to the north, another fall of boulders prevented any attack, but beyond that, the temple's walls were low and mostly undefended. Only a matter, of time, Casmin thought, till the Kahmudjans breach the lowest points and then the fight would turn.

And yet he did not despair, for Casmin knew the priestess of the mountain's heart had other defenses, planned against this very moment for generations. Deep within the mountain, chambers lay, gates of stone and vents that opened and closed with the turning of enormous wheels, so that fire and water might mix, so that the oozing molten blood of Zenthe might run to terrible purpose.

White as sudden ice, a hissing curtain rose just beyond the walls, a sizzling sheet of steam louder than the screams of the Kahmudjans. In series, painted in the rainbow of colored flame, explosions of steam shot from crevices and hidden holes in the mountain, searing the attackers and blinding them.

This time, Casmin thought, there is no mercy in Zenthe's kiss.

The clouds of steam boiled high and fell as hot rain. Blown by summer winds back into the temple, the drizzle smelled of rich brimstone, the

perfume of the mountain's heart. Beyond the walls, Casmin heard the cries of dying men and the sound of the survivors stumbling and running in the darkness, and then the brave soldiers under his command offered up a cheer of triumph that rang of a prayer to the goddess.

Casmin waited, tense and keenly alert, for Kai's next order. In moments, a panting runner came to him. "Move north and west," Kai's messenger said, "The eyes of the mountain say they are moving to our flanks."

Casmin gave his orders and then climbed to the top of the Tower of Ice. He saw far into the valley, into the spreading pool of torchlight, black crawling shadows at its edge, the impossible mass of the Kahmudjans. Forewarned, he saw how the lights moved subtly north, to support the building assault. He descended as quickly as he dared, the rising sound of combat urging his feet faster until he reached the wall and followed the path his men had taken.

Even before he reached the place he had chosen for his men to defend, Casmin heard the cries and crash of combat and then he was within it, men tangled in knots of pain all around him. His heart racing, Casmin drew his sword to meet the wild, almost blind charge of a blue-robed fanatic.

Slice and thrust, hack and parry. Casmin cut the man down even as another attacked. He saw with

dread that no line had been formed, that the Kahmudjans had struck too quickly and that his men were outnumbered and surrounded, then he had no time to think at all, his whole world balanced on the edge of his blade.

A curtain of steam shot up off to his left, but Casmin knew that the mountain's fire had limits, that the water loosed to make the deadly sheets had been pent for decades and only time would replace it. It seemed to Casmin that, even had Zenthe's power been endless, that the Kahmudjans were desperate enough now that they would have attacked through the scalding heat, treading down the bodies of their fallen fellows to stop the vents and gaps.

Casmin's troops fought valiantly and soon there were no more Kahmudjans to kill. He stood among his lieutenants, his arm aching from the blows he had given and received, bruises and bleeding cuts beginning to assert their claim on his attention. He looked around, cold dread touching his spine as silence save for the chorus of dying men that littered the mountain's rim, echoed in his ear.

Numb and chill, even in the heat of summer night, Casmin walked among the wounded and watched the carts of mercy, their wheels slow circles in the darkness. The whisper of hope, as men were borne away to the temple where the

priestesses waited with the surgeons, pounded at his heart.

"Captain," a voice called from nearby and he knew the voice at once.

The nearest brazier cast a light the color of amethysts, illuminating the mounted figure who approached him, smooth and trim as a willow in the hot breeze.

Elena, the maiden of the forests, the shape of Zenthe's will.

Casmin looked up at her, her appearance not shocking, in spite of its improbability. "We have beaten them."

Her voice fell on him like harsh sleet.

"No, Casmin. I have ridden from their midst. They come again, like the ocean."

Casmin turned from her, and like distant thunder he heard the single cry in ten thousand throats, "Kahmudj." Casmin knew he stood on the rim of nothingness. Beneath his feet the mountain trembled.

Elena dismounted and Casmin saw amethyst fire dance in her dark hair and in the depthless blackness of her eyes, as she offered him the reins and commanded, "Go to her. Be with her now."

"My place is here," he replied. "I cannot ask others to die while I turn away."

"Casmin, you must have courage enough to do your true duty." Elena's voice gave him no room

for doubt, no choice but obedience. "Go to her now."

He whispered, "Yes, my goddess," and then vaulted onto Elena's horse. Heaving sides between his knees, the hard pounding of hooves on paving stones could not drown out the surging roar of the rising blue army. Casmin followed the wagons and carts that bore the leaking dead and crying maimed, across the courtyard, around the crater, red now in the fullness of night, and to the chamber of the goddess.

Behind him, to his side, all along the alabaster walls, he heard the ring of battle, weirdly rhythmic, like a duel of giants trained in some enormous dance of death. The illuminated face of the temple grew before him and then he was upon the gate and through it, flying down from the horse, his heartbeat faster than the quickening cadence of death. He burst into the temple, past priestesses and nurses, into the chamber of Zenthe, filled with pain, awash with blood, even the veil of the goddess somehow red and dripping.

Lying near the dais, Casmin saw Kai, a ghastly wound exposing a wet expanse of rib in his side, his face pale as milk, but he smiled when he saw Casmin, if only for a moment. "The goddess has sent you, Casmin. Hurry!"

"What?" he asked. "Where is the High

Priestess?"

"She has gone to the Mirror to die." Kai cried harshly, his eyes wide and desperate with fear and pain.

"Save her. Save us all."

Chapter 4

Ribbons of mist rose from Zenthe's Mirror, easy tendrils offering grey comfort to the air. Adita stared at the lake, her gaze taking in every grace to be offered in the noisy dawn, desperate for solace, but hollow to all. The fresh morning belied the heat of summer, the stone beneath her feet cool to the weary pads of her heel and toes. Night retreated, tired and forlorn, as if exhausted from the violence and screams of agony, the clash of arms and the horrible sighs of death, still echoing just beyond the low rim around the Mirror.

She had not cried, not one tear, as injured and dying guards filled Zenthe's chamber, as blood ran across the beautiful floor meant only for pleasure. So subtle, the tidal change between efficient treatment of the wounded and the horrible reality of efforts overwhelmed by sheer numbers. The halls of the temple trembled with voices as well as with the horrible cacophony of

the battle, growing ever closer. Adita did not need the clamor or runners to report to her the fight's progress; the wounded kept their own score. And as physicians and attendants stretched themselves thin, each body brought to the infirmary on stretchers or carried by comrades became an exercise in the most brutal, basic judgment. Worth saving or beyond hope? The men and women who could not be saved were taken to Adita's private chamber, where they lay in tightening rows, their gasps and screams a hymn to her futility. Acolytes saw to their comfort as best they could, and only the grace of death kept the chamber from overflowing, cries turning to silence, a pause between the choruses.

She shed not one tear — such luxury had no place in the infirmary.

Until Kai.

When he arrived, bleeding, his face contorted and sweat-laced, Adita heard her own voice crack.

"Kai! Dearest Zenthe, no!" She fell to her knees, hands trembling with urgency and fear as she unbuckled the leather tunic he wore, revealing his right side sliced open and oozing blood. Kai wheezed as she pulled the armor away. He turned to her, his gaze unfocused under trembling lids.

"Kai, please talk to me. Talk to me, you old goat."

Tension filled her throat and her heart

tightened as Kai's eyes cleared for a moment.

"Adita." His voice barely reached her.

"That's right, Kai. It's me. You stay with me. Talk to me." She kept her voice calm and even as she carefully exposed the wound.

"I saw Nansco's ass," Kai whispered and grinned as his shallow breath raged. Mirth faded in a groan.

Adita smiled at him, the knot in her belly growing as she examined the wound. "That's right, you old goat, you keep lusting after that young buck. I'm sure he'll come around in time."

Three ribs exposed by the cut, one broken, another two questionable, and the wound seeped in a thick stream. She reached into the pouch at her side, removing from it the last clean cloth she carried. Carefully she held the bandage against the blood flow feeling Kai's pain as her own when he winced.

"And how is it, Kai, Nansco showed you his ass?" she asked, eager to keep Kai's mind active and alert while they waited for a physician.

Kai groaned. "His belt got cut in a scuffle and his trousers ended up around his ankles. He mooned me while he pulled them back on. Nice ass."

Kai's eyes closed and Adita's anxiety spiked.

"Kai, you just wait. I bet you see more of Nansco when this is all over," she encouraged as

she continued to cleanse the wound.

Kai rolled his head toward her and opened his eyes. Guilt, sorrow, and hopelessness glazed the surfaces. "Nansco's dead. He...he defended me when I fell."

Burning, the first tear slid down Adita's cheek. She stroked Kai's cheek, then lifted her head and looked around the chamber, the sounds of the wounded rising quickly to deafen her, overwhelming to the point of static silence.

And still more came.

Adita looked down at Kai, her vision blurred by salt. One look in his eyes and Adita knew for fact what had only been fear.

Zenthe would not win this battle.

She lifted her gaze to the veiled statue of the goddess and envisioned the future, the shattered marble and defiled visage of Sul Tarkus' victory.

Adita withdrew. Her lips stilled and the tears of failure fell silent from her lashes. Kai's eyes closed again and Adita only stroked his hair, her gentlest touch for her oldest friend.

Waleni, the senior physician came to her, the elder priestess' stoic expression edged with fatigue as she settled on the ground beside Kai.

Adita leaned over Kai and pressed her lips to his forehead. "Thank you, my friend. For all you have given me, all you have done. I love you, you old goat."

Rising, she gave her friend's care over the physician, knowing the healer would have Kai up and about chasing young men again in no time.

If.

Adita wove her way through the pallets, her vision acute, seeing the smears of blood, spattered high onto the walls now, red turning black in the cracks of ancient mosaics, the stories of Zenthe saturated in death.

Kai would live, but what world would her friend wake to?

What world would greet them at first light?

Priestesses and soldiers flowed in and out of the chamber, stretchers arriving full, leaving empty, a constant economy of suffering. At the doors, Adita turned and looked at the image of Zenthe at the far end of the chamber, stately and graceful, the veil's slow wave in the currents unsteady as a weeping sigh.

Sul Tarkus would have his way with Zenthe; the temple shook with his desire.

Adita nodded to Zenthe, then exited the chamber, passing through the temple like a phantom, as though she were already dead, through the alabaster gate, across the courtyard, and onto the path that led down to Zenthe's Mirror.

She had thwarted Sul before and she would again.

One could not destroy what no longer existed.

The lake seemed silent, as though its tranquility was somehow apart from the rage of steel, the shouts of desperation so near at hand. No bird's cry, no curse of wolf at the rushing dawn, all scattered before the outrage of the battle.

And yet the surface lay still as glass, showing the first streaks of violet that crept up from the eastern sky, richer than blood, leaking into the dome of heaven. Adita focused on a single tendril of mist as it made its ghostly path toward oblivion, fading as it stretched beyond the grasp of the still surface.

The slightest shrug of her shoulders and the cotton robe she wore, stiff and wet against her thighs with old and fresh blood, fell to the ground around her feet. She looked down at the robe, a part of the hem exposed beneath the pillow of cloth. The blood of so many marked the cloth, insuring the tale of her failure, but Adita's disgrace would remain upon the bank, her dishonor and shame in the rags she left behind.

She stepped from the stone into the lake. The warm water invited her, eager for a final embrace. The slightest ripple spread across the surface, radiating from her intrusion. She would dive, her lungs full, and swim with all her might, pull her way through the dawn pool, violet fading to blackness, down, down, down. The water washed

at the blood on her legs and she reached into the lake, reveling in the warmth and the way the air cooled her hands when she withdrew them. She gazed at the center of the lake. Out there, Adita did not know the true bottom. The search for its sounding had long been her game. She frightened Kai more than once as she played in the depths, her desire to find limits daring her into one more pull down, one more kick, the reluctance to return to the surface. She hated to forego the peace of the void.

This morning, Kai would not call her back. No one would.

“Adita.”

Strangely, her name upon his lips did not shock her in the least. Casmin had ever been with her, in her heart, even before he physically arrived at the temple. That now he called her name, his voice thick with concern, seemed only right.

She looked over her shoulder and saw him on the bank, a few steps away, still as one of the marble statues in the temple, one hand outstretched to her, his gaze a mix of weariness, fear, and...

The sounds of battle seemed miles away, and though screams still echoed, there was weariness to the cries as though the dying might well be running out of hot breath.

“It’s over, isn’t it? The Kahmudj have taken the

temple," she whispered, her voice strained with despair.

"No, Adita, not yet, but we cannot stop them."

Adita turned back to the lake, nodding, overwhelming sorrow filling her soul. "It ends then, here, now, by the will of Zenthe."

Warm and strong, Casmin's hands stroked her arms, the sound of his feet in the water behind her and his radiant heat salving her spirit. His arms encircled her, his lips pressed to the top of her head, the kiss chaste, yet astonishing in the depth of desire it conveyed.

"I cannot stop fate, Adita, no more than I can halt the sun from rising, and if the world ends this day, I will not let it pass without speaking the truth."

She relaxed in his arms, her bare back against his chest, her hands finding their way to rest on top of his hands. So natural, his strength surrounding her, his lips against her ear.

"I love you, Adita."

Above the disappearing mists, brushing the leaves of the rushes, soaring above the treetops, Adita's heart leapt beyond her being. She turned in his arms, elation and dismay battling for supremacy.

"Casmin," she said, his name sweet on her lips even as she resisted her heart's desire.

He put his finger to her lips, and gazed into her

eyes. "I have loved you since the beginning, Adita, as high priestess, as my sovereign, as the embodiment of all women. As Zenthe. But also, Adita, I have loved your spirit and determination, your honor and compassion. I love *you*, Adita." His thumb caressed her jaw, light as air. "Just you," he whispered against her forehead as he placed a tender kiss.

Red light filtered over the rim of the crater, streaking the violet, then turning the morning plum. She looked at Casmin, his strong jaw, dark, flowing hair, and hard body, he exuded the very essence of masculine perfection. During the years before she became High Priestess, Adita knew she would have enjoyed Casmin as a lover, but now in his arms, the last day dawning, Adita truly saw him, and understood.

"Casmin, I have known the bliss that is Zenthe's gift, but never have I known Zenthe's grace in love until you," she wrapped her arms around him, her hands slipping under the material of his short tunic, fingers marveling at his skin.

"There is no more time for us, no more world to serve. I have no fear to say to you those same words, for Zenthe screams them from my heart, the truth greater than taboo's silence. I love you, Casmin."

His arms pulled her tight against him and his

lips found hers. The kiss shocked her, the surge of emotion and physical desire blinding and deafening her to all but him. Her senses reeled, her breath gone as his mouth claimed hers in a rogue's kiss, strong and supple, taking away inhibition and leaving behind a void where once her sorrow crowned her soul.

Will-o-wisp, light filled and floating, she pressed against him, engaging the kiss, her tongue twining with his, tasting him, savoring the spice of his mouth and the musk that filled her nose. Liquid fire flowed through her, slicking her sex and sparking a sweet ache she longed to have addressed. Her bare breasts pressed against the ravaged leather armor that covered his chest.

Even through the leather, she felt his heartbeat.

Casmin's arms tightened, crushing her to him, his kiss deepening. She wanted nothing more than to be devoured by him, to lose herself in the muscles and heat of him.

He pulled away, his lips so close to Adita's their warmth touched her nose, and breathed, "If the world must end, I am where I belong."

His hands stroked her arms and over her shoulders. Electric, the pads of his fingers traced down her breasts, spiraling around the nipples, the circles tightening as did the knot in Adita's center. Flesh, she wanted more of his flesh in her hands, wanted the mounds and crevices available

to her tongue and lips. And she wanted him, his flesh, the unprotected beat of his heart. She found the lacings of his armor and tugged them and he paused in his sweet assault to help her. He cast the armor away and she took the hem of his cloth tunic, and lifted the linen, to free him of his shirt.

In the cotton dawn, she stared at his bare chest, a fresh wound across his right shoulder reminding her of the battle that still echoed just beyond the rim of the crater. She leaned forward and kissed below the puckered seam, her blood surging, as if to span their skin, her essence joining his to heal all wounds.

Only Casmin's heart moved, the breath in his lungs still, his flesh warm, but frozen. Adita kissed again and again, her lips tingling with each brush, fever rising even as she sank to the ground, her knees upon the soft sand of the Mirror's shore, the water failing to draw away a skin of heat.

As if willed, his trousers and boots joined her robe and his tunic upon the bank. Before her, bare as creation, Casmin stood tall, proud, and achingly beautiful. Her gaze roamed with decadent leisure over his body until it settled on his cock, impudent and bold, the erect shaft mesmerizing her as it pulsed with promise.

Let the Kahmudj have the world but in this frozen moment before the end, she would have her lover.

Without volition Adita reached out to the shining staff with its glistening bead that anointed the crest. Her fingers approached his cock as if it might vanish like the mists. Light as silk she touched the swollen head, following the graceful slope of the crown. Casmin's sharp intake of breath bolted sensation through her. She knew this power, she remembered it from years ago, how something as simple as a touch might bind a man and a woman. Man, so strong and sure and all too capable of taking from a woman that which should only be freely given, in a single moment, with a single breath or touch or word can empower a woman, give to her divinity, by reminding her she is all woman and every woman. Such communion was beyond price, she knew, for in that moment, promises are made each to the other. If kept, trust blooms and bliss becomes the ultimate reward.

Her fingers slid down his cock, tracing a vein toward the thicket of hair at the base. Midway through the trek, her hand curled around the thick shaft, savoring the rhythm created by his rushing blood. She rose to her feet, her heat mingling with his. His arms circled around her, and Adita released his cock, sliding her arms around him, banishing the meager distance that separated them.

"This last day, I choose my mate," Adita kissed

the hollow of his chest.

Casmin lifted her chin and kissed her, stealing her breath with wild plunder. His hands roamed freely over her back, stroking the sensitive flesh of her buttocks, sly fingers slipping below and between her legs to tease her damp pussy. His cock pressed against her belly, alive and warm, an inescapable heat that branded her skin.

Her hands sought their own treasures, stroking his back, sliding over the hard flesh of his buttocks, squeezing, pulling him tighter to her. He growled, primal, and his arms tightened around her for a moment, before he pulled away to lift her, pivoting and stepping up onto the stony, ashen shore. With infinite care, he lowered her to the ground, the sharp black sand of the bank cushioning her in a rough embrace. Her feet still fell to water, the gentle caress of the lake like a kiss on her ankles and toes.

Casmin knelt between her legs, his gaze upon her hungry and awed. He leaned over, his long dark hair titillating her ribs and belly as his lips enfolded her right nipple, his tongue flickering over the rapidly stiffening flesh. She arched into the blast of sensation and ached when he pulled away. He quirked a smile as mischief danced in his gaze. "I've wanted to do that for years," he confessed.

A giggle escaped from Adita's lips as the

enormity of the moment formed fully in her mind, and was as quickly set aside with the impishness of Casmin's smile. He did not fear fate, did not fear curse. For him, this was not duty or pride. She saw no tension in him, no concern; he seemed to want nothing more than for them both to enjoy themselves.

And Adita could hardly concur more.

He stroked up her legs, his gaze following his hands' progression. Gentle yet strong, he kneaded her muscles and traced the soft indentation of her knees and thighs. As his exploration reached the apex, he traced the border, his thumbs brushing lightly over the lips, teasing the folds that ached for exposure. He did not linger at her pussy, his touch soon drifting over her belly and her ribs. He cupped her breasts, his fingers curling around the sides before single fingers circled the rims of her nipples. Adita closed her eyes and savored the fever born of his hands.

His hair washed down her, spilling over her breasts as he leaned to close his lips around her left nipple. Her eyes opened quickly as she stiffened from the flash of electricity that coursed to her core. She closed her arms around him, her fingers tangling in his hair. He suckled gently, teasing the nipple to full attention before pulling it between his teeth. Tender, yet confident, he pulled at the stiffening bud, his tongue whipping across

the tip in maddening strokes. Adita's soft groan melted into his hair as she kissed the top of his head, desperate to curl around him, to capture him within her own skin.

Casmin shifted, relinquishing his position between her legs to straddle one instead, affording him a better angle. With his mouth filled with her breast, his hand soon returned to the triangle of gold between her legs.

A single blazing foray, tracing the wet lips, the tender fire of his fingers in a tantalizing slide along the edge of her pussy, her hips moving with his strokes, her thigh brushing against his balls and cock.

Natural as fire, he slipped his fingers between the folds, exploiting the wetness he'd created. Perfect strokes of her pussy drew a keening breath. He found her clit with his thumb, setting his callused pad against the stiffened flower as another finger delved deep, rhythmic, purposeful, and all the while his mouth continued to entertain her breast.

Adita's ears rang with rushing blood and the echo of Casmin's pulse, her vision turned to haze as the curtain of pleasure descended upon her. Never had her skin burned so hot, nor had her pussy ever known such sweet constriction. Every breath she pulled into her lungs pulled also the amazing musk of Casmin's maleness.

So close to complete.

She gently pushed at his shoulders, her hands stroking his hair and cheek as he released her nipple and looked at her, confusion a thin sheen over an expression dominated by desire. She smiled at him and kissed him lightly, the gentle pressure of her hands continuing, guiding Casmin onto his back.

He settled on the black sand, his fully erect cock pitched between them.

"I want all of you, Casmin," Adita smiled as the sense of power she'd felt earlier bloomed anew within her. She settled between his legs upon her knees and stroked his legs, her fingers sliding through the thick mat of dark hair that surrounded the base of his cock. She leaned over him, nestling his length between her breasts as she placed a kiss over his heart. She looked up at Casmin and smiled as her own sense of play poked at her. Where her lips had just been, she placed a gentle nip. Casmin's body jumped and his head fell back onto the sand with a thump.

"Zenthe's robe, Adita," he groaned as he stroked her hair, and thrust his hips toward her.

Adita grinned, then pressed her lips to his chest again, light kisses, her tongue a whisper in each as she marked her way down the center of his chest until his cock tapped at her chin.

She sat up, her gaze locked on the impressive

shaft. All this time the magnificent gift of his cock had been so close to her. The bead she had seen earlier had long been shed stickily upon her thigh, but another formed, and Adita chose to accept the invitation.

She set her lips against the bead, spreading the satin droplet over them. Her tongue, not to be denied, stroked the sensitive head, exacting a growl from Casmin. Slow, enjoying the rich, male taste, Adita filled her mouth, her tongue wild over the head until the weight and length of him pinned it beneath, turning it into a wet, eager pillow. She closed her lips tight around him, and opened her throat. Slow inches and Adita took as much of his cock in as she could before beginning the slow withdrawal. She set the rhythm, feasting on his strength and satin, her nose brushing the curls as she devoured him, then her tongue's frenzied lashes lingered as she pulled away, almost releasing his cock from the sweet prison of her mouth.

She could easily continue, enchanted by the sweet salt of Casmin's prick, but she wanted more, and she knew he did as well. She released his cock and licked her lips, smiling as she straddled him, settling over his cock, pinning it between them. His essence on her lips, she kissed him, twining her tongue with his in a fierce dance of completion. His hands settled on her hips,

encouraging their undulation. His cock wet from her mouth met the slick heat of her pussy and there an endless, fierce fire grew as she raised herself and then settled, so that his cock parted the cleft of her pussy but did not penetrate her.

Adita shifted her weight to her knees and lifted her hips, freeing his cock to attention. His hands still on her hips, she easily guided him until the head rested at the gateway. He looked up at her, a maelstrom of desire and passion swirling in his gaze, and for an instant Adita feared for him.

"There is no return from this act, Casmin," she warned as her heart thundered in her chest.

He slowly pulled her toward him, the head of his cock sliding into her, the thickness and length soon banishing all concerns and fears as he filled her entirely. She rose and settled again and his hips rose to meet her, united entirely, and all she felt, all she knew, was that union.

The earth beneath them shook. The water of the lake trilled with vibration as the ground trembled with sudden violence. On the far side of the crater, rocks tumbled to the ground, some splashing into the water. He held Adita where she was, their bodies whole, his cock encased in her flesh. And as quickly as it started, the earth stilled.

The distant song of the battle changed, diminishing in ferocity and tone, a collective apprehension of the mountain's will, the enormity

of death suddenly small against the motion of the fundament beneath their feet.

Adita understood.

"Why would I want to return to life without you?" His voice rang low, thick with honesty and desire.

Adita stared at him, her fingers reaching out to trace the outline of his lips. "If the world should divide, if it should break into a thousand pieces, it will not part the two of us."

As one, harmonic, the steady rhythm between them grew. She rode him, her knees cushioned by the black sand, his cock sliding easily in and out, filling her, and caressing every recess of her sex. Casmin's hands on her hips helped guide her, lifting her and lowering, his hips thrusting up into her sending shocking waves of pleasure through her as he pushed ever deeper into her. He sat up and cradled her in his lap, buried in her flesh, and as her pleasure mounted, he catapulted her sense to another level as his mouth claimed one of her breasts again. She arched back, exposing her chest, lost in the rising pleasure, the rhythm natural and building. Energy gathered at her core, singing with anticipation. Her pussy ached with sensation and her blood raged.

Casmin's breath fumed like a raced stallion, heavy and fast. He closed his arms around her again, and carefully rolled with her until she again

felt the cool, gritty wetness of the bank. And in a liquid move, Casmin plunged even deeper into her. Adita gasped, shocked by the sweet force of his thrust. Deep, possessing, confident, Casmin drove into her, ravishing her body with sensation as each penetration of his cock claimed her. Her hips met his, their bodies in perfect synchronism, as the flood of pleasure surged. He shifted again, kneeling, pulling Adita to him, her hips pressed to his. She wrapped her legs around him, eager to hold him close and he gripped her hips and pulled her onto him, thrusting deep, her torso exposed to the cool dawn air as their combined heat coated them in sheens of sweat. Adita crushed him between her thighs, her senses close to overload, her reason completely gone. She closed her eyes and melted into the pleasure of his flesh, his cock riding in and out of her, her flesh folding around him, tight, swelling.

And when she thought she could take no more, Casmin's fingers exploited her clit. Light strokes against the sensitive bud, his cock insistent now, deep and deeper, stroking the engorged flesh of her pussy in perfect rhythm, every surface of her body ablaze with the magic of his touch.

So small, so secretive, the tickle began, taking the swirling flood of sensation and driving it toward final bliss. She arched her back, her focus totally on the powerful thrusts of his cock, each

drive pushing her closer toward oblivion.

The mountain shuddered again and she heard the Mirror turn to waves, felt the wash of heated water up her legs, over them both, the pulse of the mountain her pulse, the deep stroking in her pussy, the motion of hot rock within the earth, the thrust of tree trunks slow and eternal, wheat in summer, the rut of dragons.

Her clit rippled with pleasure and the sensation grew as Casmin impaled her, his cock lancing through her pussy with pure fire.

All light, all darkness, every color flashed through her. She gripped his thighs between her legs, crushing hard, crying out, her voice a song of divine ecstasy. Overwhelming pleasure erupted within her. The orgasm shattered her soul into stars of rapture, millions of fragments of joy and delight shot beyond her body into the heavens, filling the sky then falling to earth again as joy and renewal.

Casmin's cry joined her own as he thrust deep into her, coming hard, his cock still plunging deep, prolonging Adita's orgasm.

Zenthe's ecstasy.

He pulled her close and rolled so she lay upon him. He showered her in tender kisses, her eyes and cheeks, lips and nose. His arms closed around her and he held her tight, his heart beat matching her own. Adita relaxed in the cocoon of his arms.

Her body still sang with the magic of their passion, and her mind still spun with the truth of their union. Time and place seemed demarcated — before and after — and Adita could hardly remember what before had been. Casmin, breathing and warm beneath her, in her, had released her.

Zenthe, alive, unbound and free, and all the world to know again.

The mountain trembled once more and then was still and from beyond the rim there was only silence.

Adita reached out and where her hand touched the black sand, she felt her own flesh, vast and sensitive, her eyes in the purple heaven, the rippled Mirror an insignificant barrier between worlds, woman and goddess. She felt the veil fall away, from her, from Zenthe, a whisper of stained fabric fluttering to earth in a chamber bloody with the struggle for renewal.

Her breath was the morning breeze singing among the dead and filling the living with divine madness, the Kahmudjans scattering like flower petals before a procession of the goddess, invisible and serene, lines of golden fire running like streams of lava down the slope and across the world, in the rivers, the valleys, the wasteland, all the way to the sea.

Above the rim, the sun rose, turning the

shadow of the crater to gold. Diamond dew slid from leaves, birds sang and called to each other throughout the woods, and fish jumped to break the stilling beauty of the Mirror. Over the lake, the mists rose to touch the golden light and melted into memory, even as the trees and vines of the forest beyond budded with the promise of new life.

The hope of a new world.

Epilogue

Through travel-weary eyes, she watched low, flat waves crawl ashore, white foam on black sand, bearing a fresh smell, wind from the west, blowing across the dark, shining sea.

"That's not how I heard it," said the man who sat with her, at a table on a balcony, a shelf of ancient, railed marble projecting from the façade of a massive, ornate building, remnant of some forgotten time. A portion of the old temple or palace, atop a rocky bluff, just north of the delta of the river Bliss, the widening mouth of plenty, had been converted into a tavern, catering to the growing stream of travelers that had found their way through the vanishing wasteland to the coast. "The goddess is not constant at all. She is changed..."

"I don't mean to deny her blessing," he protested. "That's not my point."

"Tell me." She appraised him. This man was no

vagabond, nor was he a merchant, one of the army that plied the river now, buying pearls and selling wheat, shipping casks of oil eastward through the diminishing deserts, to burn in the lamps of Margate and Fever's Ditch and even in the temple of Zenthe. "Tell me what you have heard."

He regarded her for a long moment. "Not just what I've heard." He smiled. "What I've seen with my own eyes." He had very nice eyes, dark and large and bright with pride and humor, and they contrasted with his brass-blond hair, combed high and barely suppressed behind a leather band, inscribed with runes. He was not heavily muscled but he moved with assurance and an endearing clumsiness.

"I've been to Zenthe's temple," he said. "The mountain is an amazing thing to see. Its slopes are so bright in spring — a million wildflowers grow there — so that, from a distance, the cone itself appears as an enormous bloom, all the colors of the rainbow. The beasts in the forest of the valleys around the mountain live in harmony and balance. I saw a deer and a wolf drinking side-by-side."

"Did you see the goddess?"

He shook his head, grinning. "No, but I was well-entertained by priestesses. And I met the High Priestess — a woman named Rivah. I've never seen a more sorrowful soul."

She smiled at him. "The stories say Zenthe showed mercy to that priestess."

"None who saw her would call it mercy. She does not enter the rites, I heard, and she lives at the whim of the goddess and her consort, day to day. The woman walks as though she dare not breathe and her eyes hardly seem to see."

"But she serves Zenthe, and so she has hope."

"I suppose, though I saw no hope in her bearing. She serves humbly.

"Anyway, I stayed at the temple long enough to use their libraries then I came down the river to the shores where Damtown used to be. I saw the edges of the dam, but the middle span is under water now, the lake — swollen with the springs that opened all along the river, and the drenching rain — spilled over the dam. They call the lake Bliss now, and it has claimed all the basin of the mountains, taking Damtown and much of the land around it. It's become the biggest lake in the whole world.

"Then I followed the river through the wasteland. It's a miracle to see, like a green path through the desert, wider every week. There are new towns and camps everywhere. I hear it's the same north and south and east — Zenthe's blessing flowing to the sea.

"So to the sea I came. I thought Lake Bliss was big, but this . . ." He gestured at the expanse of

rolling green and laughed a little. "I have never even seen the ocean before and it exceeds its legend. Now I seek a boat so that I may sail upon it."

"You have traveled much in a short time," she admitted. "Not even a year."

"I have seen most of the world since Zenthe's grace transformed it and I rejoice to live in this blessed time." He smiled at her and his dark eyes danced. "And that was even before I met you."

She laughed and cocked her head a little, as she asked him, "So you believe in Zenthe's power?"

"A man would be a fool not to. Even the Kahmudjans worship her now."

She remembered the last camp of sky-blue tents she had seen, only a week after the greening, the faces of the men and women, still weary and rapt from the orgiastic days that followed the mountain's blooming, blue robes in tatters or absent entirely. "But," she said, "not all of them do. The priest Sul Tarkus, the one some say was Kahmudj incarnate. He has vanished."

The man's gaze turned toward the sea. "I heard Sul Tarkus has gone alone deep into the vanishing wasteland, that he seeks the greatest possible distance from Zenthe's blessing, but his followers build temples to Zenthe now. They worship the goddess and the woman who embodies her."

"Do you believe then that the priestess Adita is

Zenthe? That the priestess has become immortal?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. That's what I meant when I said the goddess was changeable." He gestured at the balcony and the tavern. The wall behind them was made of white marble, its smooth surface polished by centuries of wind and sand, the etched shapes of old heroes and monsters mysterious and powerful. "See this place? These ocean villages were cities in our grandfathers' grandfathers' day. This might've been a rich man's mansion, or even the palace of some lord. Zenthe's blessing has its seasons and its terms. History teaches us so."

"So the wasteland will return?"

"Maybe, but not in my lifetime." He shrugged and touched her hand. "If I find a boat, will you go with me?"

She cast her smile like a spell at him, genuine and warmed by his interest in her, by his wits and his dark eyes. "I might. Why do you travel so swiftly and so far?"

She saw the fire in his eyes, the light of inspiration, one more spark of Zenthe's magic, burning like a line of the mountain's heart, wild in the world. "I mean to make a map of all the lands and waters," he said. "The first and truest. I will be wealthy in wisdom and someday in gold. If I can only find a boat."

Her heart sang with the glory of Zenthe, who

greened the world and radiated light in the hearts of men and women, inspiring their passions. This was a new age and the goddess was not in the temple, not locked away awaiting some suitor, yearning for knowledge, for life, for fulfillment of every desire.

Zenthe was in the world.

Zenthe was everywhere.

"What's your name?" she asked him.

"Mendus of Lares is the name I sign on my maps. What's yours?"

She stood, looking down at him, and offered her hand.

"My name is Elena," she said, smiling. "Let's go find a boat."

About the Author

When asked “Where are you from?” my answer tends to be, “I’m from all over.” Born in Virginia and later raised on a sailboat, I have traveled extensively and have grown up to appreciate the world in all its forms. I am always looking for the next adventure.