

Chapter 1

TAMARA

Zenia woke up in a pool of sweat with darkness surrounding her. It was a dream that woke her up--a Truth Dream. The Truth Dream, the one that she'd been waiting for. The one originating from the spell she'd cast a couple weeks ago for this very moment.

Both queens were going into labor.

She threw the downy blanket from her body, fetched her clothes and struggled to put them on. Her hands could hardly work the fasteners, they trembled so much. She could hear the moan from Mariam, the usurper queen, sleeping in the next room. Zenia prayed to the Mother Goddess that Tamara, the true queen, was moaning from labor at the same instant.

The spell Zenia had cast those many months ago should have synchronized the pregnancies of the two women, but it was an experimental spell Zenia had pieced together from her limited

knowledge--a part of one spell that synchronized events to the phases of the moon, a part of another that linked the fates of two people together, a part of a third that blessed the progress of a pregnancy. Zenia wasn't smart like her mistress Eloise, her adoptive mother who'd taught her everything she knew about village magic. Eloise probably could have fashioned the experimental spell with skill, but Zenia had no idea if her efforts had succeeded.

If she had succeeded, not only were the two queens going into labor at this moment, but every event from their water breaking to each stab of contraction of their wombs to the crowning of the infant's head, would coincide with each other.

If she had failed, this whole night would be a disaster, and she and her beloved queen Tamara would be dead before dawn.

Zenia crept through the darkness, feeling her way to where she had stashed her supplies. She slid the string of a small pouch around her neck, gathered up the bundle of clothes that she had prepared for this moment, wrapped in a linen cloth, and retrieved the small flask. She had to hurry before Mariam's moans woke anyone else. The contractions were still new enough that she didn't cry out loudly.

Entering the usurper queen's bedroom, Zenia spoke softly, "My Mistress, I am here. What's the matter?"

"Zenia, the baby's coming," Mariam said through her panting.

"Too soon!"

Zenia kept her breathing as calm as she could. This was the only indication she had that her spell might be working. If the two pregnancies were synchronized, Mariam should give birth a month early. She prayed fervently that it was true.

"I brought something for you to ease the pain." Zenia held the tiny flask up before Mariam's eyes. "Drink this."

"Thank you!" she said as she grabbed it and swallowed. The pain must be making Mariam appreciative, Zenia thought. She normally treated her chambermaid with contempt.

Zenia waited as the potion seeped into Mariam's system. Even though she treated Zenia with youthful arrogance, Mariam trusted her completely, because Zenia had never given her reason to do otherwise. Her longsuffering was now paying off.

Mariam gazed at Zenia and smiled warmly as the potion worked, calming her, easing her pain, and finally dulling her mind. Since Zenia was the first person Mariam locked eyes with, Zenia was the one the potion caused her to obey. She could see Mariam's eyes glaze over, her facial expression slacken, and knew she was charmed.

"Stand up," Zenia hissed. It felt good to treat her like the servant. Mariam complied, pausing a moment to steady her balance with the effects of the potion. Around her loins, her nightgown was wet and odorous with fluid from her womb.

From the bundle of clothes, Zenia slipped out the torn, blood-stained cloth. Many months ago she had daubed Tamara's wound with it when her husband King Christian had discovered she was pregnant and beat her. Zenia had used that same cloth to create a link between the two women, tearing it in half and burning one piece as she cast the spell. The stain of Tamara's blood would now make the sympathetic connection between them.

"Take this," Zenia demanded, handing the cloth to Mariam. She lifted her hand and took it, staring down at it without comprehension.

"Now come with me." Zenia took her arm with one hand as she clutched the bundle of clothes with the other, and brought her out of the queen's chambers into the large corridor. "Lead me to Queen Tamara."

Mariam began to shuffle forward, slowly and deliberately. Her pace tested Zenia's nerves, and she looked about for any movement in the dim light of the occasional torch on the wall. Zenia's hand through Mariam's arm began to tremble. This was the moment she would learn if her efforts had been in vain. If her spell had failed, Mariam would lead her nowhere. Tamara would give birth, then be killed. Zenia would be found leading Mariam around in a magic-induced trance, a pouch of tiny magical globes around her neck. She would be executed as well.

If her spell had succeeded, the connection of childbirth

between Mariam and Tamara would draw the two women together. Mariam would lead her to wherever Tamara had been hidden, and with the help of Mother Goddess, Zenia's plans of escape might actually work.

Mariam led her down the large staircase to the Great Hall. This was the most dangerous moment in the entire plan. Even if Mariam was heading straight for Tamara, someone could find them suspiciously wandering the castle. She had wracked her brain trying to think of a better way, and had often cursed herself for not being as witty as her mistress Eloise. She had no doubt Eloise could have devised a better scheme with more reliable magic. But all Zenia had to work with were her own skills. In the end, she could only hope that the lateness of the hour would keep them from being observed.

It was a reasonable hope. The castle of King Christian was an indulgent, careless place, thanks partly to his youthfulness when he ascended the throne, and partly to the sorceress Gwendolyn that he'd inherited from his father King William. With the help of that enchantress's powerful sorcery, Christian's immediate enemies had been pushed back, and the entire kingdom had become complacent, from the captain of the guards to the lowliest hired enforcer. They all knew Gwendolyn was the one who truly stood guard through her scrying powers.

Gwendolyn herself had become complacent because no one dared

challenge her anymore. She would be deep in sleep right now after her usual evening of searching and searching in her enchanted trance--for Goddess knew what.

So even though Zenia's nerves trembled, she expected nothing to happen.

She was right--they made their way through the Great Hall, their feet padding on the huge rug that covered most of its floor, and through the flickering dimness of the castle corridors, Mariam moving slowly but unwaveringly. Before long Zenia realized Mariam was heading for the castle dungeon. Her heart leaped. Everything seemed to be coming together!

The dungeon air was dank and musty-thick. Dark stains, green moss, and black mold decorated the stone walls. The flames from too few torches attached to the walls lit the corridors gloomily. The dungeon was a maze with constant twists and turns. Zenia shook with dread that a guard would appear at any moment. She removed her hand from Mariam's arm to slide a copper-colored globe, about two inches in diameter, from the pouch around her neck.

But this part of the dungeon seemed deserted. No guards around, and the cells all empty. It made sense--neither King Christian nor the sorceress Gwendolyn would want anyone to see the true queen imprisoned in a dungeon cell. Zenia's hope grew that everything would go according to plan.

Ahead the sound of gurgling water made Zenia pause. Mariam kept marching forward. "Hold!" Zenia hissed in a sharp whisper.

Zenia crept forward and peered around the next corner. She saw a basin recessed into the wall with a stream of spring water spilling into it. A premonition overcame her that Tamara's cell would be near, and if her cell were near, a guard could also be near.

Gingerly, Zenia approached the basin, laying the bundle of clothes on its edge. The constant stream of spring water echoed through the dungeon halls. She crept to the edge of the next corner and listened. There was heavy breathing with a touch of snoring. She carefully peered around the edge.

Yes, there was a guard, seated at his station, head lolled back in sleep.

"Wait here," she whispered to Mariam, then crept up to the guard, rolling the globe in her fingers. Holding her breath, she lifted the globe to the guard's nose and crushed it. Its fragile metallic shell gave way, and a yellowish vapor swirled about and whooshed into the guard's nostrils as he inhaled. A shudder ran through his body. He murmured and rustled in his chair, then calmed down. The snoring became louder.

Zenia eyed the ring of keys attached to the guard's belt. She wished she could just grab them and open the cell gate, but she didn't dare. The sleep vapor she'd prepared was a mild

concoction. She didn't dare put him into too deep of a stupor with a stronger one--he had to look like he was only asleep, not unconscious, because it wouldn't be long before others showed up. The potion was only enough to deepen his sleep and keep him from being roused by any noises they made. Tugging at his belt would be too risky.

Oh, how she wished Eloise were here to help!

Mariam stood waiting with a mindless expression. Her body twitched with a contraction, but she made no reaction to the pain. A soft moan floated down the hall from around another corner.

Tamara in labor, with a contraction that came at the same time as Mariam's. Her spell had worked!

Tears slid from Zenia's eyes as she expressed thanks to the Mother Goddess for blessing her plans.

Zenia hissed at Mariam in a sharp whisper, "Follow me!" and hurried toward the moan.

She rounded the corner and saw Tamara in her dungeon cell, bent over with her hands clutching her belly. Tamara's eyes lifted, wet with tears, and she moaned, "Zenia! Thank the Goddess!"

Zenia rushed to the gate and crouched, reaching through the bars to gather up several strands of straw from the dungeon floor. The stench of the dungeon cell assaulted her. To think her



poor Queen had to live in this filth!

Holding the straws bundled together into a shaft in her hand, she touched their edges to the keyhole and uttered an incantation. As she stroked the shaft with her other hand, she breathed on it with her mouth. It congealed into a hard, golden object shaped like a key.

The object slid perfectly into the keyhole. The lock clacked open louder than Zenia would have wished. Mariam plodded up behind and stood waiting listlessly.

Zenia eased the gate open and stopped immediately as the creaking echoed through the hall. This will not do! She decided to yank the gate fast and get the noise over with, grateful for the sleep vapor she'd given the guard. She shivered at the metallic whine, but it died quickly, and the gate was open enough for one person to pass through. No sound came from the direction of the guard but snoring.

"Walk into the dungeon cell," Zenia ordered Mariam. The usurper queen's eyes twitched as her body obeyed. There wasn't much time left. The potion was starting to wear off, and a part of Mariam deep inside tried to rebel.

Zenia squeezed in after Mariam and helped Tamara to her feet. Her belly was huge, and Tamara supported it with both her hands. "Thank the Goddess you're here," she uttered again, then buckled over as another contraction hit. A pathetic groan slid through

her clenched teeth.

Mariam's body trembled as an identical contraction hit her womb, and her eyes squinted.

"We need to hurry," Zenia whispered to Tamara. "Take your clothes off." The queen nodded.

Zenia repeated the order to Mariam: "Take all your clothes off." The several seconds of delay before Mariam obeyed disturbed Zenia, but obey she did, her eyes dark and locked on Zenia. The gossamer royal nightgown dropped to the dungeon floor and Mariam stepped out of it.

The two queens stood naked in close proximity to each other. Zenia paused an instant to gaze at both youthful bodies. Tamara was seventeen years of age. Mariam, thanks to the illusion spell, looked the same, but she was a year older.

It was the first time Zenia had seen the two together. Even though Zenia knew the sorceress Gwendolyn's spell had made Mariam look like the true queen, the resemblance still astonished her. Even down to the same moles on the same places on their bodies that no one but the king or the chambermaid would ever see. The only difference was the dungeon filth on Tamara's body and the disheveled appearance of her hair.

Zenia bent over and scooped some dirt from the floor. Mariam glared at her, and an abortive grunt escaped her lips, as Zenia smeared the filth over her naked body. She then rubbed her hands

in Mariam's hair, mussing it up.

"Put those on," she said to Mariam, pointing to the tattered clothes on the floor that Tamara had just removed.

Mariam's teeth grit as her body grudgingly obeyed. She was fighting hard now. Only moments remained before the charm spell would fade and Mariam would cry out in her piercing, shrewish voice. Not even the enchanted vapor would keep the guard asleep after that.

"Let's go, my Queen," Zenia said. "I have clothes for you by the water basin."

Tamara nodded, eyes gleaming with unfallen tears of pain.

Zenia grabbed the nightgown Mariam had left on the floor and led Tamara out of the cell. The poor queen lumbered with the weight of the baby. Zenia nudged the cell gate closed and pressed until the lock clicked, then the two of them crept around the corner, past the guard, and around the other corner to the basin.

Feeling prickling on the back of her neck as she waited for Mariam's call of alarm, Zenia balled up Mariam's nightgown tight around the golden key of straw and tossed both far into an empty cell. The bundle landed back in the shadows where it would not be easily seen. By the time anyone discovered it, everyone would already know what Zenia had done.

As Tamara pressed her back against the wall with a contraction and stifled a cry, Zenia opened the bundle of clothes

she'd brought and pulled out a washcloth. She dipped it into the spring water, drenching it. Mariam let out a moan in the distance, and Zenia knew they were out of time.

She handed the washcloth to Tamara. "Quickly! The charm spell is dying."

Tamara scrubbed the filth off her body as Zenia untangled the royal clothing she had brought, an elegant, casual maternity dress the usurper queen had often worn when relaxing in the castle gardens. Tamara had the worst of the dirt off, and Zenia toweled her down quickly. "Put this on fast, my Queen. I'm sorry I have to rush you when you're in labor."

"My dear Zenia," she said as she struggled into the dress with her enormous belly, "I'm just happy that you found me. I never thought I'd see you again."

Mariam cried out inarticulately. It wasn't from any labor pain because Tamara had none at the moment. The potion had worn off, but Mariam's power of speech hadn't quite returned. In a moment it would, first slurred, then clearing to normal.

"What is your problem now, bitch?" a male voice growled.

Tamara gazed at Zenia with alarm.

"Go!" Zenia cried in a harsh whisper. She fastened a hook on the dress that Tamara had missed and gathered up the towel and washcloth and the linen fabric that had bundled everything together. The two pressed forward, Tamara moving unnervingly

slow.

"Aaaaah-aaahm the queen!" Mariam cried in the distance.

"That again?" the guard scoffed.

The two women raced out of the dungeon, back into the corridors of the castle. Another dangerous moment approached--getting past the guards at the castle entrance.

Zenia wished she could just switch Tamara and Mariam, restoring things to their proper order--the true queen in the queen's chambers and the usurper in the dungeon. But she knew that would never work because Gwendolyn would recognize the true queen by the lack of magical aura around her.

Then for whatever mysterious reason she wanted it, Gwendolyn would have Tamara's newborn infant at last, and there would be no more reason to keep Tamara alive.

The only solution was to flee. Zenia needed to get Tamara and the infant safely into the care of Eloise, hidden from King Christian and Gwendolyn. She'd sent a cryptic message to her a fortnight ago, warning her that she'd be coming. She hoped the message had gotten through.

It wouldn't be easy to hide Tamara and her child. Zenia wasn't quite sure how powerful Gwendolyn was. Vastly more powerful than Zenia, to be sure, because Gwendolyn was a full-fledged sorceress who had studied the Ancient Magic, and Zenia had only been taught basic folk magic by a local witch in the

village where she grew up. Zenia's advantage was that she had kept secret the smattering of magic skills she had. Not even Gwendolyn had given any sign that she knew Zenia could cast spells. Zenia had used her powers as sparingly as she could to avoid drawing attention to herself.

They approached the side entrance that the king and queen often used to walk in the garden--the public garden where they would entertain guests during the summer months. Zenia could hear the hushed voices of the guards in conversation with each other. Even in the casual castle of King Christian, those who guarded the entrances did not dare sleep for fear of execution.

As they reached the final corner before coming into view of the entrance, Zenia handed the bundle to Tamara, saying, "Please hold this a moment, my Queen." Tamara took the bundle just as a contraction hit, and she muffled her cry with it.

The sound of distant commotion floated from the direction of the dungeon.

"They're coming!" Tamara whispered.

"They're probably on their way to tell Gwendolyn that you've gone into labor," Zenia said. Or maybe the guard finally believed Mariam when she claimed to be the wrong prisoner. Either way, there was no time left.

Zenia pulled a silver globe from her pouch and carefully peeked around the corner. The two guards stood on either side of

the entrance, gazing in Zenia's direction. She pulled back quickly, her heart pounding with terror. Had they seen her?

"What do you suppose all that noise is?" one guard said.

"Probably the Royal Lovemaking." The two guards snickered.

Zenia took a deep breath, then walked out into full view. The guards looked at her, and one said, "Chambermaid, what are you doing here?"

She crouched down, placed the globe on the floor, and gave it a shove in the direction of the guards.

The two stared at it rolling toward them. "What the hell is that?" one said to Zenia.

She said nothing as she gazed at the globe. Would it roll far enough? Would the timing be right? Would the vapor catch them both?

The guard who did not speak knelt on one leg to catch the globe. The other leaned over him and watched. A couple feet away, the shiny, silvery surface of the globe sparkled, then burst into a cloud of bluish vapor that engulfed them. They gazed at Zenia with a confused look, then toppled to the floor in unconsciousness.

Zenia allowed herself a fraction of a second to sigh with relief, then pulled Tamara to the entrance. She threw all her strength into lifting the bar and pushing the huge gate open.

Behind them voices spoke with garbled words. The castle was

coming to life with the announcement of Tamara's childbirth. This is what the sorceress Gwendolyn had been waiting for all these months. Zenia trembled with fear, wondering how soon everyone would realize it was Mariam, not Tamara, in the dungeon cell. No one but Christian, Gwendolyn, and Zenia knew the switch had ever taken place all those months ago. But Gwendolyn would see right through the illusion spell and know that the wrong woman was imprisoned.

Zenia prayed to the Mother Goddess that Gwendolyn wouldn't go to the dungeon herself to witness the birth. She prayed that Gwendolyn would command the baby be brought to her. It would buy them precious time.

Zenia managed to swing the gate wide enough for the two women to squeeze through. She stepped out first with Tamara right behind. The full moon that, through Zenia's spell, triggered the labor in both queens, lit the garden, and they took the path to the outer gate that opened to the street. Two more guards would be there, just inside the gate. Zenia fingered a bronze globe as they approached the guards. The moment the guards turned and saw them, Zenia threw the globe hard against the ground at their feet. The globe burst, and the same bluish vapor incapacitated the guards.

Zenia fumbled for the gate key hanging on one guard's belt, dreading that a stream of pursuers would burst from the castle.



With the key finally in hand, she unlocked the heavy gate and swung it open with a grunt. One of the guards muttered something she couldn't understand, twitching with the effect of the vapor.

Tamara let out an unmuffled cry with another pain. "They're getting closer together," she moaned.

"I know," Zenia said. "I'm sorry, my Queen, but we have to hurry."

Zenia supported Tamara by the waist and tried to rush her as much as she could, keeping to the shadows. With this full moon, the sentries in the turrets above would easily spot two women leaving the castle.

They headed toward the royal stables. Zenia could feel the faint tingling as they crossed the perimeter of the powerful masking spell that surrounded the castle--surrounded every castle where a sorceress dwelt. Those old witches couldn't let one another see what they were up to! Reaching the stables, Zenia beat on the door to the livery man's quarters. Wake up! she cried in her mind.

Finally the door creaked open and the bleary-eyed man growled, "What is it?" His eyes became more alert, and he said, "Zenia!" Then a smile crossed his face. "Eager tonight?"

"This is the night, Hector!" Zenia said. "Please, we need the horse."

"We?" Hector looked past her, and he gaped at Tamara. "The

Queen!" He grabbed Zenia's arm and pulled her close to his face.

"You didn't tell me you were bringing the Queen. What the hell is going on?"

"I don't have time to explain right now. Please!"

"Zenia, you have to tell me--"

"Sir!" Tamara cried out. "I command you to prepare a horse for us immediately!"

Hector stared gloomily at the queen. "It's ready now. Zenia told me--" He glanced at Zenia with a scowl. "--she said it would be soon. I've kept one ready every night."

They hurried to the stables, Zenia and Tamara lagging behind. Tamara buckled over in pain.

"Great Gods, she's in labor!" Hector spat as he swung the doors open. "The horse is right here." He unfastened the reins and led the animal out.

Zenia looked the horse up and down and growled, "What is this, the worst horse in the stable?"

"Yes!" he spat. "I didn't know the Queen would be with you!"

"It's old."

"You wanted me to give you the king's best horse, just to make sure he'd notice right away?"

"I'm sorry," Zenia said. "You're right. Thank you for your help."

"Gods, Zenia. Why does the Queen need to sneak out in the

night on a stolen horse?"

"Not now!" Zenia said. "I'll tell you when we meet again."

He harrumphed, then helped the two women mount the horse, Tamara still clutching the bundle that Zenia had given her. "You'd better have the horse back by tomorrow night," he said as he handed the reins to Zenia and slapped the horse's haunch. The horse jumped and broke into an unenthusiastic gallop.

Tamara's breathing was a heavy huff in Zenia's ear as her Queen clutched tightly to her waist with both arms. When another contraction subsided, Tamara wept, "Oh, Mother Goddess, this hurts!"

Zenia wanted to fall to the ground and beg her Queen's forgiveness for putting her through this, even though she knew it was necessary to save her life.

"Zenia," Tamara whispered into her ear, "what did you mean, when you meet him again?"

"Nothing, my dear Queen," Zenia cried against the wind so she could hear. "I just said it so we could get out of there."

"How did you get him to give us this horse?"

Zenia pursed her lips grimly, and for the first time in her life did not answer a direct question from her Queen.

"Zenia!"

"I--paid him."

Tamara rested the side of her head against Zenia's back.

Zenia could hear faint sobs coming from her.

"Anything to save you, my Queen," she whispered to herself.

Zenia drove the horse along the East Highway, directly away from the city of Fenweald and into the forest. She had spent months planning for this. Back to Zenia's village in the outskirts of Luteche. Back to Eloise who had raised Zenia when she was orphaned as a little girl--the village witch who had taught her folk magic, as much as Zenia with her limited wits could master. Gwendolyn would use all her powers to search for Tamara and her baby, and Zenia knew magic would be the only protection against her. She prayed that the magic of Eloise would be enough to hide the mother and child from Gwendolyn's searching eye. She knew even Eloise's magic would not be enough to take Gwendolyn on directly.

The rush of the air as they fled through the forest and the rush of the wind through the leaves created a steady whoosh in Zenia's ears. The chill of the night bit at her cheeks. A moth fluttered straight for her face and slapped into her forehead. The moon winked steadily through the crowns of the trees. The road was dimly lit, but lit well enough. It was the road home and Zenia knew it well.

Tamara's cries of pain became regular. Her breathing was harsh and fitful. With many miles left to travel, Tamara shrieked, "It's coming! Stop, Zenia, stop! It's coming!"

"My Queen, no! It's too soon. The castle is still too near."

"Zenia, please! The baby...I can feel it...it's coming."

Zenia searched for a clearing and saw a small one just ahead. She pulled on the reins and slowed the horse, steering it to a tree she could tie it to, then leaped off the horse. The bundle that had been wedged between Tamara's belly and Zenia's back tumbled onto the dirt. With great difficulty, she helped Tamara to the ground.

Tamara bellowed with a contraction. "It's coming!" she wailed.

"Oh, Goddess, why now?" she murmured. To Tamara, she said, "We need to get your clothes off," and began unfastening the dress. Tamara tried to help, but buckled over with the pain. "I'll do it, my Queen." She worked Tamara's clothes off and laid them aside.

"I need to feel for the baby." Zenia reached down, pressed her fingers into Tamara and felt the scalp. "You're right, it's coming. You need to crouch down, my sweet Queen, crouch down, and with each pain, squeeze as hard as you can."

Tamara howled and bore down. The contraction passed, and Tamara panted heavily. "It hurts so much, Zenia."

"It'll be okay, my Queen." Zenia quickly gathered up some wildflowers and leaves. "If there's anything a village witch knows, it's spells for childbirth."

She held the bits of vegetation in her cupped hands and whispered an incantation, then crushed them between her palms. She took the mulch of grass and petals and rubbed them against Tamara's belly, smearing them on her skin.

Tamara shrieked with another contraction, tears streaming from her eyes and mucus streaming from her nose.

"Doesn't it hurt less?" Zenia said with consternation.

Tamara answered with a wail as she bore down.

"It should be working!" Zenia crouched down for a better view. Already the baby's eyebrows showed beneath the sticky mat of dark hair plastered tight against its scalp.

Zenia sensed something, something disturbing. She muttered a quick breath spell of Sight, holding her hands in front of her, fingers spread and palms facing the baby.

The dark aura hit her like a blast of icy wind.

She fell back. "Oh, dear Goddess!" she gasped, putting her hands to her mouth. "I know why Gwendolyn wants this baby!"

Tamara let sobs escape as the latest contraction ended. "What?" she spat as if she wasn't listening.

"Oh, my Queen!" Zenia threw her arms around her neck. "I couldn't sense it while the baby was inside you, still deep inside your life force. But now..."

"What are you talking about, Zenia?"

"Your baby, it's powerful. There's some kind of magical power

inside it." Zenia paused to stifle her own sobs that suddenly wanted to escape. How could she say the rest of it to her beloved young queen that she had been wet nurse to--virtually a mother to?

But she had to tell her.

"I'm sorry, my dear, sweet Queen Tamara. Your baby has a cursed power inside it."

Tamara fixed her gaze on Zenia, a gaze that looked perplexed and horrified and enraged. "What are you saying?"

"That's why Gwendolyn wants this baby."

"This is my baby," Tamara said through squinting eyes. "My sweet, innocent baby. How can you say that?"

"I'm sorry!" Zenia looked about without knowing what she was looking for. Maybe some hint of what to do. Something in the trees or the flowers or the swish of the horse's tail to give her an idea.

Tamara's body clenched with another contraction. Zenia leaned toward her. "Stay away!" Tamara spat. "Don't come near my baby!"

Zenia ignored her and leaned forward to grab the baby's head. It was all the way out but for the chin. The scrunched, blood-stained face looked like any other baby in mid-birth, but Zenia couldn't shake the feeling of dread that seemed to ooze from the birth fluids.

Gently turning the head of the baby as the latest contraction

died, Zenia said, "One more push should do it." She didn't say the rest that she was thinking.

This baby had come fast. Fast and easy--hardly any effort at all. Too fast and easy. This baby wanted birthing quickly. It wanted to be out in this world...for what?

Tamara panted without a word, her eyes closed, her hands resting on the ground behind her to support her in her laborious crouch. Sweat streamed down her face and glistened on her bloated breasts.

In the moment of calm, Zenia knew what she had to do. She couldn't let this baby fall into Gwendolyn's hands. She couldn't let this baby fall into anyone's hands who might use its power for evil. She couldn't let the baby itself grow up to use its own dark powers.

She couldn't let the baby live.

Her tears streamed down her face. It would stab Tamara to the depths of her soul for Zenia to kill her baby. Tamara would hate her forever.

Another contraction began. Tamara's eyes popped open and she squeezed. Zenia eased the baby's body sideways so the shoulders could come out. They did, and the rest of the body slid out in an instant, trailed by the umbilical cord.

A wolf howled in the distance, and a violent shiver washed through Zenia. The aura of darkness permeated the air around her.



Even the wild beasts could sense the presence of this dark force!

"It's out!" Tamara cried.

"It's out," Zenia said.

"Where is my baby?" The glare in Tamara's eyes was accusing.

What should Zenia do? Her mind spun dizzily. Should she break the infant's neck? Should she hand the newborn babe to its mother to suckle? Should she turn and flee and rid herself of this whole horrifying dilemma?

"Give me my baby, Zenia!" Tamara growled. She rolled forward onto her knees and grabbed for it.

Reflexively Zenia pulled the baby away. She knew she could never kill it if she gave it to Tamara. She knew she wasn't ready to kill it. She had no idea what to do.

"Zenia, I command you to give me my baby!" Tamara suddenly buckled as another contraction worked on the afterbirth.

Zenia knew this was the moment to do the deed. A quick snap and it would all be over. Except for a brokenhearted queen who would despise her and probably kill her in turn.

Zenia looked at the baby, eyes squinted shut, lungs wheezing with its first breaths, glistening with blood and fluid, thick black hair matted to the scalp.

It was just a baby. A little girl.

Tamara cried out.

The baby's eyes opened and Zenia shuddered. They were black,

blackier than a moonless night in the darkest forest. Black with a cold stare.

Tears streaming down her face, Zenia wrapped her hand around the baby's skull and prepared to twist. The wolf howled again, causing Zenia to jump.

"Zenia," Tamara wailed, "please don't kill my baby."

"It's evil," Zenia whimpered.

"It's just a baby."

"Look at it!" Zenia rested the infant in one arm and thrust it forward. "Look at its eyes."

Tamara leaned forward and gazed. A smile crept across her face, then she saw the eyes. She gasped and recoiled, stumbling back onto her haunches.

"No, no, oh Goddess, no."

"I'm sorry, my dear Queen."

"No, not my baby!" Another contraction hit. Tamara cried out.

"We've got to get the caul out," Zenia said. She tugged on the cord with her free hand. Slowly it gave way and the caul popped out.

The baby wailed weakly.

"Zenia, don't kill my baby!"

"I have to!"

"Please, Zenia. You're a sorceress. Do something about it."

Zenia wrapped her hand around the skull again. The baby's

tongue flicked out as the chilling eyes stared. Like a snake.

"I have to," she whispered, but she couldn't bring herself to twist.

"Zenia, you're a sorceress. Can't you save my baby?"

"I'm no sorceress, my Queen. Just a poor village witch."

"Zenia, please." Tamara's eyes pleaded as she leaned back on her arms, looking exhausted.

"I don't know what I can do."

"Please, Zenia, please save my baby!"

"I...don't..." Zenia thought hard. Was there any magic she knew that could help? Anything Eloise had taught her?

Tamara panted with her eyes closed. Her naked body shivered in the breeze. "Can't you draw the evil out?"

Draw the evil out. That reminded Zenia of...something...a night...a terrible night when her mentor Eloise had performed a miracle.

A young boy, barely two years old, suffering from a ravaging disease that was eating him alive. He had days to live, if that. His parents begged Eloise to save him, but the disease was too powerful--too much for her skills alone. She needed help. She needed an outside power to strengthen her magic, an outside source of purity to seep in and drive the disease out.

The mother instantly fell to her knees, offering herself as the source. "Take the power of my life and give it to my son."

Eloise pierced her with her gaze. "You will die."

"Take the power of my life," the mother cried. "If my son dies, I will die anyway."

The mother nursed her young son as Eloise slowly let the blood from an artery in her neck. The boy sucked the life and purity from his mother as Eloise murmured powerful incantations and the mother drifted to sleep.

Then Eloise took the boy outside and held him up to the brilliant sky. She commanded the powers of the heavens to suck the disease out so the purity could fill its place.

The boy lived.

The mother died.

"Maybe..." Zenia whispered in horror.

"Zenia, what?"

"Maybe there's something I can do."

"What, Zenia? Tell me what."

"The baby can suck the power of your life from your teats, and maybe that can purify the dark power in her soul."

"Do it!" Tamara leaned forward and reached for her baby.

"I'll have to cut you."

"I don't care. Give me my baby." Her hands touched her newborn infant for the first time, fingers grasping.

"I'll have to draw blood."

"I don't care. Give me my baby."

"You will die."

Tamara paused with her hands around the baby's waist. "What?"

"I'll have to bleed you to death. Your baby will suck the purity from your life as you die."

Tamara gazed down at her baby. She flinched as the eyes drifted toward her for an instant. "Then I die."

"My Queen, I don't even know if it'll work."

"Do it!" Tamara grasped the baby firmly and drew it to her bosom, the umbilical cord still dangling and attached to the caul lying on the ground. "If you kill my baby, I don't want to live anyway."

Zenia nodded, feeling the echo of those words with that mother from the past. "I don't know if I can make the spell work," she murmured. "I saw it heal a disease, not purify a dark magic."

But she looked around for something sharp enough to cut into flesh. She wished she had a knife so the cut could be clean and quick. Instead she found a sharp rock that she would have to gouge with.

Tamara lay back and rested her baby on her chest. The baby nuzzled and rooted and found the nipple. She began to suck.

"I'm so sorry, my dear Queen," Zenia whispered in her ear. "This will hurt."

"Do it," Tamara said as she let her head fall back to the

ground and her eyes close.

Zenia took a deep breath and gently pushed Tamara's head to the side, exposing her neck. Zenia would have to dig until she cut an artery. She wondered if this pain would be worse than the childbirth.

There was nothing to do but cut. Zenia pushed hard as she drew the sharp edge of the stone across her queen's milky skin. Tamara cried out with greater intensity than with any of her contractions. It was a horrible moan of torment. Zenia dug hard and deep, wanting to get it over with fast. It seemed to take forever before the rhythmic spurting of heart-squeezed blood pulsed out. The red puddle grew quickly.

Her queen would die now.

Zenia at once chanted the incantations she remembered hearing Eloise chant those many years ago. It was a familiar spell, a spell of purifying, which Eloise modified for the occasion. The ghastly circumstances must have burned the words into Zenia's mind those many years ago, because she remembered them easily.

Tamara began to sing, a faint lullaby for her daughter. The baby slurped at the nipple, and Tamara's blood surged out from her neck with each heartbeat. Zenia prayed the incantations with all the power in her soul, hoping with desperation it would be as effective on the corruption of dark magic as it had been on the corruption of disease.

The wolf howled fiercely. It was much closer. Zenia trembled with fear. The last thing she needed to deal with right now was a ravenous beast!

She glanced up at the horse. The creature was so old and dispirited that it didn't even flinch at the howl of the wolf.

"Zenia," Tamara whispered, barely audible. "Will you protect my daughter?"

"Yes, my dear Queen. You know I will. I'll love her as I loved you." Zenia flinched as she realized she was already speaking of Tamara in the past tense.

Tamara smiled, her eyes closed, her body trembling with cold. The baby broke her suction hold on the nipple, her mouth drooping open and her eyes closed with sleep.

A last breath rattled from Tamara's body, and no more breaths came after.

A flood of tears tried to burst from Zenia's eyes, but she fought them back. There was too much to do. She grabbed the baby and used the sharp stone to saw the umbilical cord away. It was probably the largest stump a baby ever had, but that didn't matter.

Zenia lifted the baby to herself and looked in the eyes. They were closed, and the face seemed to scowl. With the power from her Sight spell, she could feel the struggle going on inside between the purity of Tamara's sacrificed life and the dark magic

the baby was born with.

Would it work? The purity the baby had suckled from her mother fought to gain control over this innocent creature. Zenia saw nothing with her natural eyes, but she could sense the struggle almost as if it were a flashing thunderstorm of lightning and darkness.

She knew she wasn't finished. The struggle was mighty--and the outcome uncertain--as long as the corruption remained inside the infant. Zenia needed an outside power to draw the darkness away, leaving the purity to fill the void.

The horse jumped and whinnied at a rustling in the trees. Zenia swung around just as the wolf broke into view, growling and saliva dripping. It was monstrous!

"By the Goddess, not now!" Zenia cried. "I won't let my Queen die in vain!"

She held the baby up in full view of the wolf and shouted protective spells against wild beasts. The great struggle inside the infant washed over everything. The wind seemed to rage at its power. The trees bowed and creaked at its tingling. The wolf barked viciously and growled as it paced back and forth, not daring to come nearer. Its hairs prickled, standing up tall and making the animal look even more monstrous. Its eyes burned with an unholy red glow.

The baby moaned--an unearthly moan--and croaked--an unearthly



croak. Zenia needed to purge the corruption. She had no idea what would happen if she left it inside.

This wolf had to go!

Zenia advance on the animal, calling out spells, holding the baby in front of her as the child emanated prickling magic.

The wolf arched up, leapt up as if it wanted to pounce, but was held back almost as if an invisible wall were between them. With one final howl, it turned and plunged into the trees, growling its frustration.

Keeping the baby in front of her, Zenia searched around for a power to call upon. The trees? The air? The sky?

The moon. She looked up at the shining moon, eerie with its cool light and full face. The moon had been instrumental in synchronizing the pregnancies of the two women. Its expression grinned at her, inviting her, beckoning her.

Zenia would call on the moon for a second time.

She held the infant girl up to the sky. "Great Mistress Moon!" she called over the rushing wind. "Suck the corruption from this child as she has sucked purity from her mother's breast. Take that purity and turn her dark magic into a white magic, a power for good in this world."

The wind around her swirled, creating a vortex. Foul smoke seemed to ooze from every pore of the baby. At the same time a whirlwind of white mist funneled down from the grinning lunar

face, stretching in an ethereal finger of brilliance to earth. The dark vortex reached up and the two swirls touched. Crackling sparkles filled the sky as the air thundered with a vengeance.

The baby shuddered. The tree crowns danced as if a storm raged. The horse bucked and neighed in consternation against his reins. The air filled with fine, black particles that, one by one, shimmered into brightness. The white funnel of lunar mist flowed into the clearing and surrounded the two females. The baby, still held high into the air, seemed to breathe it into her nostrils. The pores all over her naked body seemed to suck it from the sky. As if a demon had given up the ghost in one great gnashing cry, the dark aura flew out in all directions and dissipated into the night.

In place of the chill Zenia had felt in her soul, an invisible glowing rushed through her body. The baby's head turned toward the sky. Her hair--once dark and matted--was dry and flowing and white blonde. Zenia lowered the child and gazed into her face.

The eyes--those chilling black eyes--peered with a silvery blue luster. A burning aura warmed Zenia's soul--an aura of purity.

Tears burst from her eyes. It had worked! Tamara had not sacrificed her life in vain. Her infant had been cleansed of the evil power. In its place glimmered a white power astonishing to

Zenia.

She knelt before Tamara's body and held the infant before the lifeless eyes. "My dear, sweet, beloved Queen. See how your daughter shines now."

She lay the baby on Tamara's naked breasts. "My new daughter, see how your mother lies peacefully. She gave everything to save you. Remember your mother. Remember her sacrifice. Oh little princess, remember your mother Tamara forever."

The baby cooed as she lay on her mother's breasts. Her eyes shone in the moonlight--the Mistress Moon that had saved her and purified her. Zenia left the child an instant to grab the dress that Tamara had left lying on the ground. She wrapped the baby in it--a queen's dress for the royal offspring.

This child--this princess--this vessel of brilliant power--was someone Zenia had to protect at all costs. In fact she had delayed too long with her flight. The birth of the child and the death of Tamara and the attack of the wolf and the spectacular purification of the moon had made her forget the danger from the castle. It couldn't be far behind! She and the new princess must leave at once.

She paused for an instant--but only an instant--for her grief at the loss of her queen and the appalling way she had to leave her nude body lying in the woods. But there was nothing she could do. If she tried to minister to the body, Tamara's death could

easily become meaningless if the king's soldiers caught up with them.

She hoped travelers would find the body. How that would shake things up in the kingdom--the queen's nude body lying abandoned in a forest!

But more likely the monstrous wolf would return and devour it.

Tears blinding her as she worked, Zenia lay the linen cloth over Tamara, covering as much as she could, then uttered what breath spells of protection she could think of over her body. She untied the spooked horse and struggled into the saddle with the baby in one arm. Quickly she dug her heels into its shanks and aimed it down the road. With only one hand on the reins and one hand clutching the baby, she dared not gallop too fast. She prayed that Gwendolyn hadn't yet determined which direction they had fled.

As she rode in the ghostly moonlight, she kept glancing down at the new princess. "You need a name, little one."

Zenia looked at the sky, at the Mistress Moon, and knew this child would be forever linked to the heavens.

"There's only one name for you, my sweet girl," she murmured as she gazed at the silvery eyes. "Celeste."