

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 one she'd cast a fortnight ago for this full moon.

Both queens were going into labor.

She flung 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 false queen, sleeping in the next chamber. She prayed to Mother Goddess that Tamara, the true queen, moaned from labor at the same instant.

Another spell Zenia 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. Typical village witch magic, but she wasn't smart like Eloise, her adoptive mother who'd taught her everything. Eloise probably could have fashioned the experimental spell with skill, but Zenia had no idea if her effort had succeeded.

If it had, 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 one another.

If it 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 the supplies she'd prepared for this moment. She hung the string of the pouch around her neck, gathered up the bundle of clothes wrapped in a linen cloth, and retrieved the small flask. She slid a

sheathed dagger into a pocket in her skirt, hoping she'd not have to use it.

She needed to hurry before Mariam's moans woke anyone else. Entering the false queen's bedroom, Zenia spoke softly, "Mistress, I'm here. What's the matter?"

"The baby's coming," Mariam said through her panting. "Too soon!"

Zenia kept her breathing as calm as she could. This was her only indication that the spell might be working. Tamara became pregnant a month before Mariam. If the two pregnancies were synchronized, Mariam should give birth a month early, just as she was doing now.

She prayed fervently it was true.

"I brought something 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. She normally treated her old chambermaid dismissively.

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

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 looked 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. "You know where Tamara is, don't you?"

Mariam nodded.

That reassured Zenia that the spell's connection between the two queens was working. 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. "Take me to her."

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 for certain 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 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 was hidden, and with the help of Mother Goddess, Zenia's plans of escape might actually work.

Mariam led her along the corridor toward the large staircase that descended to the Great Hall. This was the most dangerous moment in the entire plan. Someone could find them suspiciously wandering the castle. She'd cast her spell so the births would align with the full moon when it rose high in the sky, late in the night, the only thing she could think of to avoid encountering anyone. But it was a gamble. She prayed the servants and lords and ladies of the court would all be sound asleep in their beds, and only a handful of the King's Guard would be located at key points.

She fingered the pouch around her neck.

The first set of guards stood at the bottom of the stairs facing away from them. "Stop," Zenia said in a whisper.

Mariam complied. Zenia pulled her into the shadows, then took a globe from her pouch, copper in color, an inch and a half in diameter. She set it on the top of the stairs, uttered some words in the Ancient Tongue, and gave it a push. Quickly she joined Mariam in the shadows.

The globe rolled over the edge onto the steps below. *Clink! clink! clink!* it went as it descended.

The guards turned and spotted it, then looked at each other with apprehension. They backed away, drawing their swords, as it hit the floor and rolled toward them.

One of them reached out with the tip of his sword and stopped the globe. The surface of the globe sparkled, then cracked open in a puff of blue smoke that swirled around them. Their eyes rolled up in their heads, and they slumped to the ground.

Zenia waited a moment to make sure the noise attracted no attention from anyone else, then whispered, "Move."

She led Mariam down the stairs past the sleeping guards, then let Mariam guide her again. They made their way through the Great Hall toward the flickering dimness of the corridor that led to the guardhouse. Zenia tensed with alertness. She knew there'd be more guards there.

Mariam moved slowly but unwaveringly down the corridor until she neared the entry chamber to the dungeon. Zenia counted two voices speaking from inside. She stopped Mariam with a word and whispered, "Are we going to the dungeon?"

"That's where Tamara is," Mariam said.

"Gwendolyn promised me she'd be kept in a comfortable place."

Mariam stood peering at her without expression.

"Answer me," Zenia whispered, then realized she hadn't asked a question. "Why is Queen Tamara in the dungeon?"

“She kept trying to escape.”

Zenia’s heart sank at the thought of her queen hidden away in that dank place, but being confined within the walls of the castle keep simplified her plans.

She quickly peeked into the entry chamber. Two guards sat at a table against the wall, rolling dice and slapping coins down. She pulled out another globe.

She glanced again, gauging the distance, then jumped out, flung the globe against the wall where they sat, and leaped back out of sight, hoping they’d be too startled to recognize her.

The crunch of the globe against the wall and the sound of a chair falling over told the tale. Zenia peeked again and found one of them slumped over the table and the other on the floor next to the overturned chair.

The two women crept past them into the dungeon.

The air was dank and musty. Dark stains, green moss, black mold decorated the stone walls. They passed several sealed cell doors. The flames from too few torches attached to the walls gloomily lit the corridors. They came to a place where the corridor T-boned in two directions. Zenia waited to see which way Mariam would go. She went left.

Zenia slid a third copper-colored globe from the pouch around her neck. They passed no cells here. Ahead the sound of gurgling water made her pause. Mariam kept marching forward. “Hold!” she hissed in a sharp whisper.

Zenia crept forward and peered around the next corner. She saw a widened area where a basin was recessed into the wall with a stream of water from the River Sicana spilling into it. A guard seated at his station lolled his head back in sleep. Beyond that, another corner.

Gingerly Zenia approached the basin and laid the bundle of clothes on its edge. The constant stream of water echoed through the hall.

“Wait here,” she whispered to Mariam, then crept up to the snoring guard, rolling the globe in her fingers. She took in a deep breath, held it, and lifted the globe to the guard’s nose. Using both index fingers and thumbs, she crushed its shell like an egg. The bluish vapor swirled about and whooshed into the guard’s nostrils as he inhaled. A shudder ran through his body, then calmed. The snoring became louder.

She blasted the air out of her lungs and panted a couple breaths. She eyed the ring of keys hanging from the wall near him. The vapor induced deep sleep, but it was still only sleep, and the guard could be awakened by a loud noise—like the jangling of keys.

Mariam’s body twitched with a contraction, but she made no reaction to the pain beyond a short grunt. A soft moan floated from around the corner.

It must be Tamara, having a contraction the same time Mariam did. Her spell had worked! Tears glistened as she expressed thanks to Mother Goddess.

She reached for the ring of keys and lifted them from the hook as gently as she could. The guard slept through the faint jingling. "Follow me," she hissed at Mariam in a sharp whisper.

She rounded the corner and saw Tamara in a cell behind bars, sitting on a cot and bent over with her hands clutching her belly. Tamara's eyes lifted, wet with tears, and widened. "Zenia! Thank the Goddess," she whispered loudly.

Zenia rushed to the gate and kept trying keys until one of them worked. The stench of the dungeon cell assaulted her. To think her poor queen had to live in these conditions!

She had to force the key to turn the rusty lock. It clacked open louder than Zenia would have wished. Mariam plodded up behind and waited listlessly.

Zenia pulled on the gate 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. She shivered at the metallic whine, but it died quickly, and the gate was open wide enough for one person to pass through.

She stopped to listen. The guard's snores continued.

"Walk into the cell," she ordered. Mariam's eyes twitched as her body obeyed. There wasn't much time left. The potion was starting to wear off, and a part of her 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, then buckled over as another contraction hit.

Mariam's body trembled as an identical contraction hit her womb. Her eyes squinted as she grunted.

"We need to hurry," Zenia whispered. "Take your clothes off."

Tamara nodded.

"Take all your clothes off," she repeated to Mariam. The several seconds of delay before she obeyed disturbed her, 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 looked the same thanks to Gwendolyn's Illusion spell, even though she was several years older.

It was the first time Zenia had seen the two together. Even though she 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 gave out an abortive snarl 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 Tamara had just removed.

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

"Come, my Queen. I have clothes for you by the water basin."

Tamara nodded, eyes gleaming with unfallen tears of pain.

Zenia grabbed the royal 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 until the lock clicked, Mariam glaring at her with eyes full of hatred, then the two of them crept around the corner. She hung the keys back on the wall as they passed the guard and headed for the basin.

Zenia soaked Mariam's nightgown in the basin water. Tamara pressed her back against the wall with a contraction and a stifled cry. Mariam let out a moan in the distance. Zenia glanced at the guard in distress as he stirred. She knew they were out of time.

She grabbed the bundle of clothes and pushed Tamara into movement.

"Quickly! The Charm spell is dying."

Around the next corner they stopped, and Zenia scrubbed most of the filth from Tamara with the wet nightgown, untangled the royal clothing wrapped in linen, an elegant, casual maternity dress the false queen had often worn when relaxing in the gardens. She helped Tamara into it. "I'm sorry I have to rush you when you're in labor."

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

Mariam cried out inarticulately. It wasn't from any contraction 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 nightgown and the linen fabric. They pressed forward, Tamara moving unnervingly slow.

"Aaaaah-aaahm the queen!" Mariam cried with a slur.

"That again?" the guard scoffed.

The two women hurried out through the entry chamber and back into the

corridor. Another dangerous moment approached—getting past the guards at the castle entrance so they could head for the royal stables and flee.

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

It wouldn't be easy to hide them. She 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 witch magic. Her advantage was that she'd kept her magic skills secret all these years as a chambermaid. Not even Gwendolyn knew she could cast spells. Zenia had used her powers as sparingly as she could to avoid drawing attention to herself.

They approached the gate to the castle. She could hear the hushed voices of the guards in conversation with each other. She handed the bundle to Tamara. "Hold this, my Queen." Tamara took the bundle just as a contraction hit, and she muffled her cry with it.

A distant sound of commotion came from the direction of the dungeon.

"They're coming!" Tamara whispered.

"On their way to tell Gwendolyn that you've gone into labor." She hoped it was true. She hoped the guard hadn't finally believed Mariam.

Zenia crept up to the gate.

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

"Probably the Royal Lovemaking."

The two guards snickered.

They were both standing outside the gate to her right, but she couldn't see them to gauge the distance. Nor did she have a good angle from inside the gate to be sure to roll the globe close enough to them.

She'd have to let them see her.

She took a deep breath, then walked out into full view.

The guards looked at her. "Chambermaid, what are you doing here?"

She threw the globe at their feet. It burst into a cloud of bluish vapor that engulfed them.

"What by the demons is that?" one of them said before they toppled to the ground.

Zenia helped Tamara across the drawbridge over the moat of water deflected from the River Sicana. The full moon lit the courtyard as they headed to the stables. The buildings along the walls of the courtyard were silent and dark—even the baking house, since the workers wouldn't be there for a few more hours.

Behind them, garbled words drifted from the gatehouse. The castle keep was

coming to life at the birth of the queen's baby. Zenia trembled with fear, wondering how soon Gwendolyn 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, but Gwendolyn would see right through her own Illusion spell and know the wrong woman was imprisoned.

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

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

She supported Tamara by the waist and tried to rush her as much as she could, keeping to the shadows of the walls. With this full moon, the guards in the turrets above would easily spot two women crossing the courtyard.

The stables butted up against the wall. Zenia beat on the door of 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. "Zenia!" A smile crossed his face. "Eager tonight?"

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

"We?" Hector looked past her and gaped at Tamara. He grabbed Zenia's arm and pulled her close to his face. "You didn't tell me you were bringing the queen. What by the demons is going on?"

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

"Zenia, you have to tell me—"

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 into the stables, Tamara lumbering in pain.

"Great Gods, she's in labor!" Hector said as he swung the doors open. "What are you doing?"

"Which horse?" Zenia spat.

"Right here." He unfastened the reins and led the animal out.

She looked the horse up and down. "What is this, the worst horse in the stable?"

"Yes! I didn't know the queen would be with you."

"It's old."

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

"I'm sorry. Of course 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, then opened the secret door through the courtyard wall used whenever the king wanted to send or receive someone quietly. He led the horse out, then slapped its haunch. The horse jumped and broke into an unenthusiastic gallop.

Tamara’s breathing was heavy in Zenia’s ear as she 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 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 Queen,” Zenia cried against the wind so she could be heard. “I just said it so we could get out of there.”

“How did you get him to give us the horse?”

She 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 her back. Zenia could hear faint sobs coming from her.

“Anything to save you, my Queen,” she whispered to herself.

She crossed the bridge over the River Sicana and drove the horse through the quiet city of Luteche, the largest city in the kingdom of Gallea, and into Fenweald Forest on the East Highway. Her destination was her home village in the outskirts of Suedeche where Eloise lived, who had raised her from a girl barely becoming a woman when she was orphaned. It would take all night and part of the day to reach her—if this horse could survive the journey.

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 mother and child from Gwendolyn’s searching eye. She knew her own village witch magic would not be enough to protect them if Gwendolyn found them.

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 she 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!”

“Oh Goddess, no! It’s too soon. We’re not there yet.”

“Zenia, please! The baby...I can feel it...it’s coming.”

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

Tamara bellowed with a contraction. “It’s coming!”

“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 her clothes off and laid them aside.

“Crouch down. 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. My sweet Queen, 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.”

“It’ll be alright.” 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!” She crouched down for a better view. Already the baby’s eyebrows showed beneath the sticky matte of dark hair plastered tight against its scalp. Zenia muttered a breath spell of Sight to monitor the birth.

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 hadn’t heard.

“Oh, my Queen! I couldn’t sense it while the baby was inside you, deep inside your life vitality.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Your baby—it has some kind of power inside it.” She paused to stifle her own sobs that suddenly wanted to escape. How could she say the rest of it to her beloved young queen?

But she had to tell her.

“I’m sorry, my dear, sweet Queen. Your baby has a cursed power within it.”

Tamara fixed her gaze on her, 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 she 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 as she crouched. 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.

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 as she squeezed. Zenia turned the baby, and it slid out easily, trailed by the umbilical cord.

A wolf howled in the distance. 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 terrible force!

“It’s out!” Tamara cried.

“It’s out,” Zenia said.

“Where’s my baby?” The glare in her eyes was accusing.

What should she 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!” Tamara rolled forward on 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.

“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 want to kill her in turn.

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

It was just a baby. A little girl.

Tamara cried out with another pain.

The baby's eyes opened, and Zenia shuddered. They were black, blacker 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 cursed,” she 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. She 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! 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.

“You're a sorceress. Can't you save my baby?”

“I'm no sorceress! 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 save my baby!”

“I...don’t...” She thought hard. Was there any magic she knew that could help? Anything Eloise had taught her?

Tamara panted as her naked body shivered in the breeze. “Can’t you draw the evil out?”

Draw the evil out. That reminded her of...something...a day...a terrible day when her stepmother 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. “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 with tear-streaked cheeks, Eloise took the boy outside and held him up to the brilliant sky. She solicited the powers of Master Sun to suck the disease out so the purity could fill its place.

The boy lived.

The mother died.

“Maybe...” Zenia whispered in horror.

“What?”

“Maybe there’s something I can do.”

“What, Zenia? Tell me.”

“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 at the eyes, but her expression softened as she gazed. “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. I saw it heal a disease, not purify a dark power.”

But she pulled the dagger from her skirt and gazed at the sheath.

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 with her eyes closed.

Zenia took a deep breath and unsheathed the dagger. She gently pushed Tamara’s head to the side, exposing her neck. She’d have to cut until she found 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 edge across her queen’s milky skin. Tamara cried out, a horrible shriek of pain. Zenia cut hard and deep, wanting to get it over with fast. The rhythmic spurting of 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 spell of Purifying that she’d never heard Eloise cast before or since. The dire circumstances then 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 spurting from her neck with each heartbeat. Zenia prayed the incantations with all the power in her soul, hoping desperately it would work.

The wolf howled fiercely. It was much closer. She trembled with fear. The last thing they needed right now was a ravenous beast!

She glanced up at the horse. As old and dispirited as it was, it still bucked and neighed at the howl of this wolf.

“Zenia,” Tamara whispered, barely audible, “will you protect my daughter?”

“You know I will. I’ll love her as I loved you.” She 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 dagger to saw the umbilical cord away. It was probably the largest stump ever left on a baby, but that didn’t matter.

She lifted the baby and looked at the eyes. They were closed, and the face scowled. 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 power the baby was born with.

Would it work? The purity the baby had suckled from her mother fought to gain control over the innocent creature. Zenia saw nothing with her natural eyes, but she could sense the struggle almost as if it were a 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, as Eloise had done before.

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!” she 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 howled viciously and growled as it paced back and forth without coming 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 advanced on the animal, calling out spells, holding the baby in front of her as the child emanated prickling magic.

The wolf arched up, leaped 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.

Zenia gaped with amazement at the fleeing creature, but she had to act fast. Keeping the baby in front of her, she 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 power of Mistress Moon.

She held the infant girl up to the sky. “Great Mistress Moon!” she called in the Ancient Tongue 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 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 its 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.

The chill in Zenia’s soul evaporated as a soothing warmth rushed through her body. The baby’s head turned toward the sky. Her hair—once dark and matted—was dry and flowing in the wind and white blonde. Zenia lowered the child and gazed into her face.

The eyes—those chilling black eyes—now peered with a silvery blue luster. A burning aura surrounded the child and reached up in a column to touch the moon. An aura of purity warming Zenia’s soul.

Tears burst from her eyes. It 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 laid the baby on Tamara’s naked breasts. “My little girl, 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 purified her. Zenia left the child an instant to grab Tamara's dress still 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. The birth of the child, the death of Tamara, the appearance of the wolf, and the spectacular purification from Mistress Moon had made her forget the danger from the castle in Luteche. 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 members of the King's Guard 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 her.

Tears blinding her as she worked, Zenia laid the linen cloth over Tamara, covering as much as she could, then uttered what breath spells of Protection she could think of. 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.

As she rode in the ghostly moonlight, letting her tears flow freely now, she kept glancing down at the new princess. “You need a name, little one.”

Zenia looked at the sky, at the baby's aura rising up to 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.”