

Chapter 16

Zhair'lo and Talla craned their necks to look straight up at the moon through the hazy pinkness that had formed above them..

"The moon hasn't changed," Zhair'lo squinted, raising his voice to call out over their mutual deafness. "Is there something in front of it?"

"I think so," Talla replied.

"Well, we're into it now," Zhair'lo said.

What they soon realized was a strange pinkish cloud slowly thickened and moved lower through the atmosphere, closing down on the Oracle, darkening as it came down. Eventually, it entirely occluded the moon.

The darkness billowed, more ominously like a black thunder cloud at that point, expanding to fill the sky above them as they began to see flashes of light across its darkening surface.

Thunder soon followed, a cacophony of hammers striking metal armour, the sound of a celestial blacksmith ripping through the silence and making the clearing in the circle of stones seem insignificant in size.

More flashes reached out across the sky. Surreal colours assaulted their eyes, colours that didn't belong in a natural cloud formation. While a yellow lightning bolt felt vaguely plausible to human eyes, the red and orange defied any expectations in their mere mortal brains.

Thunder cracked with such fury that it shook the ground and terrified them both, their combined mental state sharing the chill that ran up and down both their spines. Talla and Zhair'lo shielded their faces, then stumbled on the shaking ground and fell to their knees as orbs of light arced over their heads through the clouds.

"Nine hells," Zhair'lo said as he put his arms around Talla, her head against the side of his neck where he tried to protect her from the wind blasting around them.

The clouds above them flashed again, issuing down upon them a brilliant, yellow orb. Even as this zipped through the sky and crashed to the ground directly in front of the pair of humans, another shot down in a blur of red and a third in a blur of orange.

Upon impact, the orbs coalesced and swirled, taking on a transparent appearance even as they shaped themselves into vaguely humanoid forms that were half again as tall as any person Talla had ever met.

I'd be staring at their belly buttons if they had such.

The yellow orb, in the middle, became distinctly female, wide in the hips and heavy in the breast, while the red form to Talla's right developed broad shoulders and a narrow waist.

The third, the orange one on the left, remained ambiguously thin, the shifting facial features never admitting to enough characteristics of either gender for Zhair'lo or Talla to make up their minds.

"Do not kneel!" the female announced.

"Never to us," the orange whispered a violent hiss.

"Rise!" the red male shouted.

Jarred by the power of his voice, but still frightened by the thunder and blasted by the wind, Talla stood up first, shielding her face against the sand and dust threatening her eyes. Zhair'lo rose at her side, turning his head slightly to protect himself.

"Madra Zen," Talla's eyes widened. She turned her head to Zhair'lo, but kept her eyes on the glowing woman. "That's just how she looks in the drawings!"

Zhair'lo began to worry, from the awestruck look on Talla's face, if her resolve to demand answers from the gods would hold up in their living presence.

He put that aside as the three figures hardened, their edges firming up and the winds around the pillars slowed to a dull, background roar.

Talla and Zhair'lo became vaguely aware of the three scribes, fastidiously taking notes.

I wonder what they think is most important to write.

"That's her?" Zhair'lo asked. "And the other two?"

"Padre Row?" Talla wondered, nodding to the figure on the right. "He's usually drawn like that, all muscles and square jaw and everything. I don't know the other. We only have old paintings of some of them."

The glowing yellow figure stepped forward, ahead of her two companions, and approached Talla, towering head and shoulders over her human subject.

"You," her voice thundered over Talla, "should not be clothed when you meet us."

Talla felt her body freeze in place as the god approached her. The glowing yellow hands reached out and pushed her sashes off her shoulders, her skin chilling where the luminescent flesh touched her. Talla shivered as goosebumps rose. Once her breasts lay exposed, the strange hands moved down and undid her skirt, dropping it to the ground.

"Better," the woman's voice declared.

Madra Zen, her breasts as heavy as any Goddess's but exaggerated by her gigantic size, paced around Talla, still frozen in place, examining her body.

"Curious choices, here," she remarked.

"Indeed," the deeper voiced male god replied from his vantage.

"Who are you?" Zhair'lo asked.

"Your gods, are we not?" the high pitched lilt of the orange god replied. "Madra Zen, Padre Row and me, Kell."

"The more important question," Padre Row said. "Is this: who are *you* to summon us in this barbaric manner?"

"And *why*..." Kell's skin flared all over with orange fire as it squealed and lunged at Zhair'lo, "is a male here? We only appear to women!"

"A Goddess sent us," Talla declared, trying to keep defensiveness out of her voice. "Sent us both. I am Talla and this is Zhair'lo."

They shouldn't be questioning your presence, she beamed at Zhair'lo while she tried to glare up at Madra Zen, *you're supposed to be here, just like me.*

Why did they appear anyway? Zhair'lo asked her. *And why didn't they know I was here?*

Kell put his right knee to the ground and leaned over Talla and Zhair'lo.

"That doesn't excuse the violence of your request," he intoned mildly.

"You weren't answering any other way," Talla folded her arms.

"You have forgotten everything," Kell stood away from her, then looked aside to each of the scribes before addressing the other two gods. "They write, but they lose the writings."

"It has been many of their lifetimes," Madra Zen reminded him.

Kell stood and backed away, falling into line.

"So tell us, little children," Madra Zen went on, her voice soft and patronising. "Why, after all these centuries, have you summoned us once more?"

Before they could begin to formulate their reasoning, the red god puffed out his chest and prepared to speak.

"The Temples are flourishing over the land," Padre Row recited. "The women are safe inside, the men are well cared for without. The babes suckle fresh milk and the old go unto death without pain. No one is abandoned. All are included."

"Is there a plague we haven't noticed?" Kell asked. "A violence we do not see?"

The three gods stood over Talla and Zhair'lo, their arms folded, waiting for her answer.

They're not even looking at me, Zhair'lo noted. *I guess it's up to Talla.*

"Your rules," Talla said.

"You have issue with the Dictates?" Madra Zen asked, her voice even though slightly intolerant.

"Why do you have us beaten for breaking rules?" Talla asked.

That's the crux of it, Zhair'lo thought, his mind flashing back to when he'd been forced to whip Talla until her cheeks had bled, *that horrific ritual. Forcing me to slash at her again and again, the pain searing through both of us.*

In his mind, that which followed paled in comparison. He barely remembered the woman who had forced herself upon him while he sat in a potion-induced, sexually aroused stupor, an act undertaken at the Adjudicate's behest merely to punish Talla with the watching of their sexual congress.

"We did not Dictate corporal punishment," Madra Zen replied curtly. "Those decisions are yours"

"What?!" Talla shouted back. "The Temple punishes us in your name! Your rules against Monogamy are enforced with ropes tying us down and whips cutting our flesh!"

Madra Zen frowned and looked at her fellow gods once each before turning her eyes back on Talla.

"That was the choice of the Goddesses," Madra Zen explained patiently. "The first of you chose polyamory and the rest followed. There are historical reasons for you to distrust monogamy. But it was your choice. We certainly did not make it for you."

"But, but," Talla's shoulders dropped and she looked at Zhair'lo, then back at her friends and Zhair'lo's squad now assembled behind her at the periphery of the stone circle. "But that's impossible."

"We have no reason to lie to you," Padre Row said.

"Such indignation," Kell frowned. "Is this why she summoned us?"

"I summoned you to answer for the pain I've suffered!" Talla shouted. "I was whipped and beaten bloody for breaking your rules!"

"Your rules," Madra Zen corrected her instantly. "Not ours. We gave the women power. We Dictated very, very few rules."

Talla glared, her mouth hanging open, her mind in free fall.

Zhair'lo, seeing the gap, fearing the gods might abandon them right there.

"What rules *did* you make, then?" he asked. "What did you tell the Goddesses? What *did* you force upon us?"

Madra Zen tilted her head.

"We told them to take responsibility for every person," she said. "So they wouldn't replace the abuse of women and children with the abuse of men."

"We told them to shield the children from their polyamory," Padre Row added. "And we gave them medicine to keep the children safe."

"We told them to feed every mouth," Kell said, and Zhair'lo realised this was a kind of practised litany, a recitation familiar to the Temple. "That no one should feast while anyone starves."

"That's so... obvious," Zhair'lo frowned. "Why in the nine hells would anyone want to overeat when other people are hungry?"

Kell paused, looked across at Padre Row, who had opened his mouth to continue the litany. They both looked at Madra Zen.

"He's a man," she told them. "He doesn't know."

She knelt down and sat on her ankles, her expression somewhat patronising as if to speak to a toddler in the creche, and looked into his eyes from just above his level.

"They don't teach you, do they, child?" the glowing yellow woman asked as she softly tilted her head.

"I guess they don't," Zhair'lo said.

Madra Zen hummed softly and Zhair'lo found himself paralysed. With swift movement, she stripped away his clothing, leaving him standing naked as anyone else, human or god, in the circle of stones.

"And you taught him nothing?" Madra Zen turned to Talla.

"He knows what the Temple taught *me*," Talla said. "Though I don't know how much of that to believe."

"The Goddesses were given Dictates," Madra Zen explained to them both. "Dictates to match their powers. If we checked on them and found them in violation, their power would crumble."

"They were to protect every child from every kind of abuse," she went on. "They were to feed the men and the women, not to revisit upon men what previously had been visited on women. We would tolerate no vengeance."

"The first Goddesses chose to use their bodies," Madra Zen explained. "Through sexual congress, they placated the men, brought them to heel. Their zeal was effective, but their Temple became too fruitful. Soon they had too many children and came to us for help."

"We realised the consequences of the way they used their bodies, though done now with their consent and enthusiasm, left them almost continually pregnant. If they could not control their own bodies, they could not rule the world. Their situation was only slightly better than the slavery of perpetual pregnancy from which we had tried to free them"

"So they called upon us, as you did, though somewhat more politely," Padre Row put in.

"And that year," Madra Zen continued, "we gave them the ability to choose when to conceive. Later, to protect the children from much, much too early pregnancy and other social difficulties, we gave those mothers the ability to stave off their sexual maturity."

"Stave off-" Talla choked. "So it was you!"

"*What* was us?" Madra Zen asked.

"*You* stole my body from me!" Talla declared. She waved down at the fringe of hair over her vulva, figuratively meaning her entire body. "You let them leave me with *this*! This fraction of what I could be!"

"You're *alive*," Madra Zen told her with a very mortal snort. "You are healthy. You have never been on the verge of starvation. Always lived under shelter. No man has ever forced sex upon you, or forced you to have his children against your will, or beaten you for having another man's children. You are nine thousand steps ahead of your foremothers. And you dismiss this for some vanity of your body!"

Talla froze, stymied for the moment, but recovered quickly.

"No one *starves*," Talla said. "That's - that's a word children use to exaggerate being hungry. A word the Temple uses to scare us into submission."

"You've seen the whole world, have you?" Kell asked, his tone more biting than Padre Row's had been.

"Seen *enough*," Talla retorted.

"You have not," Kell replied curtly.

"We'll deal with that in a moment," Madra Zen said, turning back to Zhair'lo. "I am not finished here."

Zhair'lo gulped, feeling her glare.

"Yes, young man," she said. "There are people in the wide world who would overeat while their neighbours starve."

"I - I can't imagine-" Zhair'lo started.

"No, you can not," Madra Zen smoothly interrupted him. "Because you've lived under the rule of the Temples all your life. The one gift we gave the Goddess, and everyone under her power, without even asking, was the Empathy of the Mesh."

"The Mesh?" Zhair'lo asked. "Like, when they *Serve* us?"

"Serve you?" Madra Zen trilled out a laugh. "Is that what they call it? Very well, yes. When the women *Serve* you. Your mind and her mind combine, do they not? For a short while, you feel the body of another human, feel her fears and desires as she feels yours. And if you do that with ninety women or nine thousand women, you know that all of those women are *humans*, like yourself."

"Of course," Zhair'lo shrugged. "I've always thought so."

"*You* personally may have always thought so," Madra Zen explained. "But for hundreds or thousands of years, humans have not always thought of each other that way. You murdered each other, visited death and cruelty upon each other for the sake of power, land and material wealth. Too many of you had no understanding of empathy. Your greed nearly wiped you out until we gave you the Empathy of the Mesh."

"Then why did you make us that way?" Talla asked.

"Pardon?" Madra Zen asked.

"If we really used to be like that-"

"You still are," Padre Row interrupted. "In the half of the world you've never seen."

"If that's true," Talla went on. "And that's so terrible, then why did you create us that way in the first place?"

Madra Zen tilted her head at Talla, then looked aside at Padre Row and Kell. Then she looked over at the scribes, listening attentively and scribbling.

"We *have* told them this before," she said, her voice soft and confused. "They have forgotten."

"Forgotten what?" Talla asked.

"We did not create you," Madra Zen explained, her voice slow and deliberate. "We *found* you this way, murdering each other near to extinction. We created the first Goddess, hoping that turning Authority over to a woman would make your existence better."

"Oh," Talla paused.

"Curiously," Madra Zen tilted her head. "She chose to use her sexuality as the Conduit of her Authority. She had been taught that this was her most important asset and her only source of power, an attitude which we could not displace from her mind. The results, over some nine centuries, seem to have justified her decision. You are a profoundly sexual people and she judged correctly. But it was her choice, not ours."

This gave both Talla and Zhair'lo further pause.

"So you're saying this is *our fault*?" Talla said. "We were guilty of being too sexual so you just had to do this to us?"

"It was not our place to change your nature," Madra Zen said. "We made an asset of the most destructive part of your nature."

"Sex is destructive?!" Talla asked. "That's ridiculous."

"Ridiculous in the present, in this place, wherever Temples rule," Padre Row spoke up, his voice deep and rolling. "Elsewhere, and even here before the Goddesses came, you would not laugh."

"Your sex drive is destructive," Kell added. "In the hands of the immature, even more so. Of all the decisions made to limit its destructive power, keeping that drive out of the bodies of children and children out of the hands of their elders, was, by far, the easiest for the first Goddesses to make."

"They decided? Not you?" Talla asked, aghast.

"Of course!" Madra Zen said. "All of this was decided by you - your Goddesses - not us. Even the Dictate of Age Difference was made with your consent."

Talla's anger seethed, but it had no place to go. Zhair'lo felt pieces of her cracking under the strain of this conversation.

They're not lying, he told her.

He sensed that Talla agreed, but she made no proper reply, her mind as listless as her expression.

"What about the Monogamy Rule?" Talla asked.

"That was not one of our Dictates," Madra Zen said. "Again, that was the Goddesses, deciding that women and men should not grow too loyal to each other as individuals. It is a very old rule."

"But you knew about it," Talla raised an accusing finger.

"Of course," Madra Zen.

"Then why did you use the mesh to torture *us* like this?" Talla said.

"The Mesh is empathy," Madra Zen began. "Your suffering is your own-"

Kell held a flaming orange arm out in front of his fellow god.

"That is not what she means," Kell said, a flaming orange finger trembling warily between Madra Zen's and Talla's eyes. Looking down at Talla from black eyes deep in orange sockets, he added. "What torture?"

"We are joined," Zhair'lo said. "The mesh that you made for sex? We are joined even when we don't touch. We are forbidden to be monogamous, but you let our minds be linked even when we mesh with others."

All three gods, yellow, orange and red, shrank back from the naked pair of humans and faced each other in a triangle.

Beams of light appeared between the heads of the three, arcs of light so bright that Talla and Zhair'lo had to shield their eyes.

When the brightness faded, Talla saw green throbbing shapes hindering her vision but managed to make out the yellow form of Madra Zen approaching her.

"We would mesh with you," Madra Zen said. "To see what you mean."

Talla's eyes widened as Padre Row stepped forward toward her. Zhair'lo didn't even notice Madra Zen approaching him until she was almost nose to nose.

Wait, how?

The god-woman had shrunk herself down to his height and he hadn't even caught it happening. Instead, focused by Talla's terror on Padre Row, Zhair'lo had seen the red god shrink until his nose came to the height of Talla's forehead.

Talla, frozen in place by either the god's magic or by sheer fright, didn't move a muscle as the god-man's glowing red erection poked between her thighs.

Is there even enough room at that angle to-?

Talla gasped as Padre Row bent his knees and slid up into her.

Oh, nine gods, what's happening? Zhair'lo thought as he felt something abnormally large and terrifying enter the mesh between himself and Talla. *That is... massive. It's like a thousand people in the mesh at once but it's just one unified mind so much more powerful than anything.*

His erection, Talla tried to explain in her mind, *it's not like - it's not normal. It **slithers** for the gods' sakes.*

Zhair'lo felt it from inside Talla's body, that strange, liquid thing flowing into her vagina.

"There we are," Madra Zen whispered to Zhair'lo, directing his intention forward.

She put her hands on his shoulders and instantly blood rushed through his body as he felt his heart pounding. Zhair'lo inhaled sharply, noting the way his erection swelled. The glowing yellow woman pushed her naked chest against his and drifted upward, putting the negligible weight of her ephemeral body on his hips as she hopped off her feet and wrapped her legs around the small of his back.

How can she weigh so little? It's like I'm carrying nothing at all.

Madra Zen let her body slide down and Zhair'lo felt her enveloping his erection in something very like a vagina but also much more tentative and unstable, as if a variety of wet muscles surrounded his erection and swirled around it.

That said, nine gods, the mesh.

The god-woman had entered his brain. He strove to contain his thoughts, to let her see his complaints, to show her the way the Adjudicate had made him beat Talla, but Zhair'lo soon found he had no control.

Madra Zen found the whipping, but she also found him spanking Sonja while the Goddess juiced him up for the long walk to Beshenna, and then she found the memory of Sonja claiming to have saved his life by sending another woman to awaken him from his post-Conduit coma.

He... he's taking everything, Talla croaked at him over their link. *He sees... everything.*

Talla had fought Padre Row, trying to keep him out of the deepest recesses of her mind, and she had exhausted herself.

Zhair'lo couldn't even try. He remembered, through Talla's eyes, seeing the women in their Offices, sorting all those cards in their drawers, picking out name after name with practised ease.

That's my head right now, he thought, *a drawer full of cards, each a memory, each as easy to see as it is to pull a stiff little card out of a stack.*

"Very well," Madra Zen said, sometime later.

She shifted her hips around Zhair'lo and those strange muscles the god-woman had wrapped around his erection tightened around the base and did something to the head that set him off almost instantly. His body convulsed, ejaculating into the flowing insides of her body. Zhair'lo looked down, watching the tip of his erection spitting semen out through the translucent layers of her yellow skin.

"There we are," she said succinctly, her voice sweet and kind in his ear. "Finish that up and we're all done."

The last twitches died down and Zhair'lo heaved a sigh of relief as Madra Zen lifted herself off of him, taking her strange swirling appendages with her.

At least they're out of our heads, Talla beamed at him, her body also heaving from the mental assault.

Did your mesh... finish? Zhair'lo asked. *Did you have an orgasm?*

I don't know, Talla sidled up to Zhair'lo and he put his right arm around her shoulders to pull her close, regrouping as the three gods did their three-beams-between-their-heads trick again. *I was too busy fighting him inside my head.*

Kell broke away from the mental link first and took a knee to face Talla, glaring at her from a threateningly close handspan away.

"You tried to destroy a Temple, did you not?" Kell rumbled at her.

"We were ready to-" Talla began.

"So you could be with a man?" Kell asked. The ambiguously gendered god pointed at Zhair'lo. "This man?"

Talla felt herself blush.

"Well?"

"Yes," she agreed.

"And a moment ago you argued that your sexual drive was *not* dysfunctional and destructive?" Kell raised an eyebrow.

Zhair'lo, still holding an arm around Talla, turned to put her behind him and stepped in front of her to face the glowing orange being.

"We didn't start it," he told the god. "You did when you supported that Monogamy rule and then joined our brains together. You - you *glued* us together and told us it was wrong to be stuck!"

Kell began to reply but a yellow hand clasped his shoulder.

"Enough, Kell," Madra Zen said.

Now back to full size, the god-woman gently touched the third god's shoulder and pulled him back into the line.

Madra Zen stared down at them for some time, Zhair'lo and Talla waiting patiently for their hearts to stop hammering inside their chests.

They know everything now, I think, Talla warned him.

I got that impression, Zhair'lo replied.

What will they think of us? Talla wondered. *Would-be destroyers of their Temples?*

I don't think they think that way, Zhair'lo told her.

It's not like they can just kill us, is it? Talla asked.

She took a deep breath, trying to stand as proudly as she could, given her nudity.

Go ahead, her sneer told them, *strike us down.*

"We gave the first Goddess power," Madra Zen mused. "So the peace of women could calm the darkness of men."

"We saw a Goddess grow too powerful," the glowing woman continued, "So we split her power amongst Queens and Sorceresses. The power was already heavy on her body, so she did not live too long. We thought the splitting of her power and the shortness of her rule would suffice to quell excess ambition."

"But still Goddesses could be too greedy," Zen looked up at the sky. "So we confined them to our Temples, and there we found the balance between glory and duty that called upon the best women and harnessed their ambition, tempering it for the good of all."

"But I've been inside your heads," she said, looking down at the two naked supplicants. "Talla and Zhair'lo. You should not exist. Not yet. Not for a thousand years. This world is not yet ready for..."

The god trailed off, looked aside at Padre Row, then at Kell.

"...for what you are," she continued. She paused a moment. "Or perhaps it is. Certainly the people who made you had no idea what they were doing, what would happen."

"The people who made us?" Talla asked. "You mean our parents?"

"Your parentage is the *least part* of your creation," Madra Zen laughed. "Nothing like you could be an accident. Someone has found wisdom we did not expect you to find. What they were attempting, we have no idea. But they got the two of you, and I suspect a great many more like you."

Something like a sigh came from the translucent yellow lips.

"We Dictated against Perfected Gestation," Padre Row said.

"But we can't be here to stop them," Kell replied.

"And here we have the consequences," Madra Zen sighed again. "This will require new Dictates and... they will have to make decisions for themselves."

"There is no point reiterating the Dictate about Gestation," Kell put in, an aside to Padre Row.

Row nodded and Madre Zen closed her eyes closed in frustration. When she opened them again, she had set her jaw.

"Easiest things first," she said. "Where is... this 'Tara'? She came with you?"

"Yes," Talla said, turning aside just far enough to point behind her.

“Tara Fo’jinn!” Madra Zen’s voice boomed out. “Come forward!”

Zhair’lo and Talla, consumed by the manners they had learned as children, did not turn their backs on their gods, but turned to face each other just enough that they could crane their heads to look for Tara.

Tara stripped out of her sashes and her skirt before she even entered the circle of stones. At first wary, she stepped forward and walked across the clearing in her best soldierly march, eerily aware of all of the eyes upon her.

It’s a long walk, Talla noted.

Zhair’lo and Talla parted to let Tara step between them, her hands folded just below her navel, and looked up at the three glowing gods.

“My education left out the correct mode of address for a god,” Tara said, jutting out her chin. “Imminence? Highness? Mistress?”

“My name is Madra Zen,” the glowing yellow woman replied.

“Madra Zen,” Tara inclined her head carefully.

“I was given to understand,” Madra Zen spoke carefully. “That you and your... female companion were beaten for the crime of giving each other sexual pleasure.”

“We were,” Tara gulped.

“That was not any kind of rule we gave to your Goddesses,” Madra Zen said. “It seems to have come about in some Temples in the decades since our last visit.”

“Right,” Tara said, ticking her chin up one notch. “And?”

Madra Zen clenched her fist and raised her arm to the sky. A bolt of lightning arced from the clouds above to strike her upraised fist and thunder clapped overhead. When the echoes died out, she called out in a voice as deep as the rolling thunder.

“Dictate the First,” Madra Zen’s shout filled the entire clearing.

Zhair’lo looked over to his right at the desk where he’d seen a scribe sitting and realised that no fewer than six women now stood at this desk, three of them with ink and pens. The women behind the scribes provided new sheets of parchment and laid them in front of the scribes.

This has become an event, Talla explained. *Everyone in Prima must know by now.*

The thunder and lightning weren’t subtle, he shot back.

“While obeying the Difference in Age Dictate,” Madra Zen called out. “So long as it does not interfere with their duties to the Temple, no consensual sexual encounter by two of the same gender shall be considered a crime, nor shall they ever be punished. If it does interfere with their duties, the corrective punishment will not be more severe than dereliction for any other reason.”

There followed a short ritual where one scribe from each of the three desks read back her transcription of the Dictate. Satisfied with this, Madra Zen addressed Tara once more.

“That should never have happened,” the god explained to Tara, her voice flat. “We gave the powers we did to the Goddesses to protect everyone, not to punish them for irrelevant non-conformity. Your behaviour harmed no one and you should not have been singled out.”

Tara looked up carefully, a mysterious look in her eyes.

Is she... humbled? Zhair’lo wondered.

"That's something they should have figured out themselves," Madra Zen said, speaking more to her fellow gods than to Tara. "I can't imagine who decided women should be punished for such behaviour. And then to credit the fabricated crime to use by way of naming."

Madra Zen looked down at Tara, who looked back up, each of them tilting their heads, but for different reasons.

"Thank you," Tara said.

"If there is anything else?" Madra Zen asked. "I must now speak to these two."

"Will you break their bond?" Tara blurted out.

Madra Zen paused and looked down at Tara. Her eyes closed as if she searched her memory and some time passed before she opened her eyes and gazed at Tara.

"At one point," Madra Zen said. "You thought that we would do that, didn't you? You hoped we would be the Great Enforcers from the Sky, that we would break their Mesh so they would have an easier time following the rules."

"Yes, I did," Tara said.

"And now?" Madra Zen asked, her voice going mild as she continued. "We could do that. But we would have to permanently prevent the two of them from ever sharing a Mesh of Empathy with each other."

The three gods waited patiently while Tara's eyes stared past them, unfocused. Talla and Zhair'lo began to wonder if Tara's opinion would somehow affect what the gods actually did.

*We **did** nearly murder thousands of people,* Talla pointed out.

Don't remind them.

I don't think they're capable of forgetting, Talla thought, *but all of them just went to great lengths to explain that they only help us with the decisions, and give us powers and limitations to carry them out.*

"No," Tara said at last. "They have something special. And it makes them happy. Don't take it from them."

"Because you are allowed your happiness?" Kell asked her. "So they should be allowed theirs."

"No!" Tara raised her voice, her chest puffing out as she glared at the orange god.

Kell only raised his eyebrows in response.

"Even if I couldn't have *my* happiness," Tara said, "Even then, I wouldn't want to take someone else away from *theirs*. That would be - I don't know the word for it - childish or selfish or - I don't know."

"Envy," Kell said, stepping forward. "You have seen the folly of malicious envy."

Kell took a knee in front of Tara and reached out with one flaming orange index finger to touch her on the forehead. Tara closed her eyes, feeling some kind of communication that placated her and softened her features.

You can feel something going on between them, Talla thought.

She's... peaceful? Zhair'lo guessed at Tara's facial expression. *I've never seen her peaceful.*

"Here is wisdom and empathy," Kell declared of the soldier with her eyes closed. "Sad that it has been birthed from pain and self-inflicted shame. But it is here nonetheless."

Kell released Tara from his touch and she gasped, leaning forward to try to follow his finger but failing.

Tara had to blink several times to reorient herself, by which time Kell had stood and stepped back beside Madra Zen.

"It shall be as you wish," Madra Zen told her, the tone somehow indicating that the decision had nothing to do with Tara's wish and that the question had been either a lesson, a test or both. "But now I ask you to return to your sisters, as I have other matters to discuss."

"Madra Zen," Tara bowed with what appeared to be sincere respect, turned on her heel and marched out of the circle of stones.

"That's settled," Madra Zen.

"And what of these two?" Padre Row asked.

"Dangerous pair," Kell put in.

"Not any longer," Madra Zen retorted softly. "Are you, Talla? Zhair'lo? I think not. I saw inside your heads. You're not about to burn down any Temples?"

I don't see any point in saying anything, do you? Talla asked.

Zhair'lo shook his head.

"They speak to each other in their minds," Kell observed.

"The wider world is not yet ready," Madra Zen countered.

"Probably not," Kell agreed. "They are, as I said, dangerous. Even if they don't burn down a Temple, they're still recklessly engaged in ruining the society we've constructed."

"Because they don't believe the alternative," Madra Zen replied thoughtfully.

"True," Kell said. "They need education."

"I've had plenty of education," Talla frowned.

"In Beshenna!" Kell retorted.

The three gods looked down at her and delivered a universal frown under which Talla flinched.

"If not for your experience in Beshenna," Kell went on, "what would you have done in Gern?"

They offered only silence in reply to this, for Talla and Zhair'lo had nothing to say.

"They will need to travel," Madra Zen said. "These two were given a sigil granting passage to Prima. We shall make them a sigil so they can travel to..."

She paused, closing her eyes once more to search her memory.

"Firosh," Kell put in. "War is coming, on that frontier. Forces gather against our Temples. Let them see that from which we have saved them."

"To Firosh, then," Madra Zen said.

She held out her glowing yellow hand, palm open, and paused, her eyes curious.

"What do you suppose a sigil from a god looks like, then?" she asked.

Closing her eyes, she furrowed her brow with focus and the palm of her hand began to grow with a bright, white light. Zhair'lo and Talla both squinted against the blazing light while trying to watch.

Not much to see, I think I missed it, Zhair'lo thought.

Me, too, Talla beamed back.

In the outstretched hand lay a small, elliptical disc, glossy white like marble and no thicker than Talla's pinky finger. As its light dimmed, a golden inlay appeared, some sort of curving design.

It's Temple script, Talla explained, the most ancient calligraphic style. I think... I think it says 'Madra Zen'.

"This will grant you and your party passage," Madra Zen said, letting the smooth disc slide down her palm to her fingertips so she could hold it out to Talla. Madra Zen flipped it over to display a different set of characters on the back. "One way to Firosh."

"There you will see the truth," Kell told Talla. "And decide for yourself. Until you have seen that, and understood it, you have little right to judge the Temples and their rules. Go to Firosh, see the war, see how the other half of the world lives, then we will listen."

"And perhaps," Padre Row's deep voice rolled over them. "We will have new Dictates."

"A war zone will be unusually dangerous," Kell said. "We must protect her, in case she is-

"Agreed," Madre Zen interrupted.

"What do you propose?" Padre Row asked Kell across Madre Zen's back.

"Viat Ignis," Kell said instantly.

A pause while, to Talla and Zhair'lo's eyes at least, it appeared that Madra Zen waited with one ear cocked for some objection from Padre Row.

After he time, his voice rumbled, "Not very effective at her rank."

Viat Ignis? Zhair'lo wondered.

No idea.

"You will need to practice, Talla," Madre Zen said, her voice rushing. She glanced up at the sky and then back down at Talla. "Practice. It will exhaust you. Perhaps you can use it once per day and first you will not be able to remain conscious. But keep practicing."

The giant god took a knee as she reached out with her right hand, palm down, and pressed her yellow glow into Talla's forehead. Talla's body jerked and stiffened and Zhair'lo lost his mental link with her.

Talla? Talla?

She is asleep, another voice whispered in his head as Madra Zen gave him one flick of her eyes. *You will need to watch over her when she uses it.*

Uses what?

You'll see, Madra Zen's smirk came over the link even while her glowing yellow face concentrated on whatever she was doing to Talla. *Watch over her.*

Catch her, now! the voice shouted in his head.

Zhair'lo reached out and embraced Talla as Madra Zen released her. He and Talla fell to the ground as the three gods formed a line once more and the winds began to pick up.

"Wait!" Zhair'lo called out. "What did you-"

Thunder cracked as the three gods turned their heads up to the sky and the cloud formations began to swirl once more. They crossed their forearms over their chests and their bodies dissolved, morphing into the three orb-like shapes they had arrived as.

In a tri-coloured flash of light and a last crack of thunder, the orbs burst upwards into the sky, disappearing into the centre of the swirl of clouds.

A few heartbeats later, the winds died out and the sky began to clear, leaving two naked humans, one holding the other's unconscious body, lying in the centre of a quiet, moonlit clearing.