

Chapter One

“I could have you executed for this, Moreva Tehi,” Astoreth said. My Devi grandmother, the Goddess of Love, scowled at me from Her golden throne in the massive Great Hall of Her equally massive Temple.

Sitting on my heels, I bowed my head and stared at the black and gold polished floor, trying to ignore the trickle of sweat snaking its way down my spine. “Yes, Most Holy One.”

“You blaspheme by not celebrating Ohra, My holiest of rites. And this one was important—the worthiest of the hakoi, handpicked by Me, celebrated with us. ”

“I can only offer my most abject apologies, Most Holy One.”

“Your apologies are not accepted.”

“Yes, Most Holy One.”

“Where were you?”

“I was in the laboratory, working on a cure for red fever. Many hakoi died last winter—”

“I know that,” my grandmother snapped. “But why did you miss Ohra? Did you not hear the bells?”

“Yes, Most Holy One. I heard them. I was about to lay aside my work when I noticed an anomaly in one of my pareon solutions. It was odd, so I decided to investigate. What I found...I just lost track of time.”

“You lost track of time?” Astoreth repeated, sounding incredulous. “Do you expect Me to believe that?”

“Yes, Most Holy One. It is the truth.”

A moment later, my head and hearts started to throb. I knew why. My grandmother was probing me for signs I had lied. But She wouldn't find any. There was no point in lying to Astoreth, and it was dangerous, too. Swaying under the onslaught from Her power, I endured the pain without making a sound. After what seemed like forever the throbbing subsided, leaving me feeling sick and dizzy.

"Very well," She said. "I accept what you say is true, but I still do not accept your apology."

"Yes, Most Holy One." I tried not to pant.

A minute passed in uncomfortable silence. Uncomfortable for me, anyway. Another minute passed. And another. Just when I thought maybe She was finished with me, Astoreth spoke. "What do you have against the hakoi, Moreva?"

The change of subject confused me. "What do you mean, Most Holy One?"

"I've watched you, Moreva. You give them no respect. You heal them because you must, but you treat them little better than animals. Why is that?"

The trickle of sweat reached the small of my back and pooled there. "But my work—"

"Your work is a game between you and the red fever. It has nothing to do with My hakoi."

I didn't answer right away. In truth, I despised Her hakoi. They were docile enough—the Devi's breeding program saw to that—but most were slow-witted, not unlike the pirsu the Temple raised for meat and hide. They stank of makira, the pungent cabbage that was their dietary staple. From what I'd seen traveling through Kherah to Astoreth's and other Gods' Temples, all the hakoi were stupid and smelly, and I wanted nothing to do with them.

I did not want my grandmother to know what was in my hearts, so I chose my words carefully. “Most Holy One, I treat Your hakoi the way I do because it is the hierarchy of life as the Devi created it. You taught us the Great Pantheon of twelve Devi is Supreme. The lesser Devi are beneath You, the morevs are beneath the lesser gods, and Your hakoi are beneath the morevs. Beneath the hakoi are the plants and animals of Peris. But sometimes Your hakoi forget their place and must be reminded.” I held my breath, praying she wouldn’t probe me again.

Astoreth didn’t answer at first. “A pretty explanation, Moreva. But My hakoi know their place. It is you who do not know yours. You may be more Devi than morev, but you are still morev, born of hakoi blood. You are not too good to minister to the hakoi’s needs, and you are certainly not too good to celebrate Ohra with them.”

I swallowed. “Yes, Most Holy One.”

“Look at me, Moreva.”

I raised my head. My grandmother’s expression was fierce.

“And that is why you let the time get away from you, as you say. You, Moreva Tehi, an acolyte of Love, are a bigot. That is why you did not want to share your body with My hakoi.” She leaned forward. “I have overlooked many of your transgressions while in My service, but I cannot overlook your bigotry or your missing Ohra. I will not execute you because you are too dear to My heart. The stewardship for Astoreth-69 in the Syren Perritory ends this marun on eighth day. You will take the next rotation.”

My hearts froze. This was my punishment? Getting exiled to Syren? From what I’d heard from morevs serving in Astoreth’s other Temples, the Syren Perritory in Peris’s far northern hemisphere was the worst place in the world to steward a landing beacon. Cold and dark, with dense woods full of wild animals, the Syren was no place for me. My place was Kherah, a sunny

desert south of the planet's equator, where the fauna were kept in special habitats for learning and entertainment. As for the Syrenese, they were the product of one of the Devi's earliest and failed experimental breeding programs, and were as untamed as the territory in which they lived.

But I knew better than to protest. Astoreth's word was law, and it had just come down on my head. "Yes, Most Holy One," I said, my voice meek.

"Mehmed will come to your rooms after lunch tomorrow so you can be fitted for your uniform."

"My uniform, Most Holy One? I will not be taking my clothes?"

"No. As overseer of the landing beacon, you are the liaison between the Mjor village as well as the commander of the garrison. Your subordinate, Kepten Yose, will report to you once a marun, and you are to relay the garrison's needs to Laerd Teger, the Mjoran village chief."

"Yes, Most Holy One."

"I will make allowance for your healer's kit and a portable laboratory, but you are not to take your work on red fever. I'm sure you have other projects you can work on while you are there."

"But—"

"No, Moreva. It is too dangerous."

"I can take precautions—"

"No. That is my final word." Astoreth leaned back in Her chair. Her eyes narrowed. "One more thing. You will be the only morev in Mjor, but that will not prevent you from observing Ohra. And you will do so with the garrison stationed there. Go now."

I stood on shaky legs, bowed, and backed out of the Great Hall. Once in the corridor, I turned and fled to my quarters. I threw myself on the bed and sobbed. It was bad enough to be

exiled to the Syren Perritory, but Ohra with the garrison? Only the hakoi served in Astoreth's military. I felt dirty already. And not allowing me to work on my red fever project was punishment in itself.

A few minutes later I felt a hand on my shoulder. "Tehi, what's wrong?" a worried voice said. It was Moreva Jaleta, one of my friendlier morev sisters.

"I-I'm being sent to the Syren Perritory to steward Astoreth-69," I wailed.

Jaleta sat on the bed. "But why?"

I sat up. "I missed the last Ohra and n-now Astoreth is punishing me."

Jaleta gave me an unsympathetic look. "You're lucky she didn't have your head. Be thankful you're Her favorite."

I sniffed but said nothing.

Jaleta patted me on the shoulder. "It won't be so bad, Tehi. The year will be over before you know it. Come on, it's time to eat."

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The next day after the morning service I walked along the hallways of the Temple, avoiding eye contact with everyone I encountered. Jaleta could be kind, but she had a big mouth, and by the time dinner had concluded last night everyone had known about my punishment for missing Ohra. "About time she was punished for something," someone said. Holding my head high, I ignored the snickers and other snide remarks as I made my way along the corridor.

Instead of going to my lab, I headed for the Temple's cartography section. Morevi Reng, our chief cartographer, was an ass but a brilliant one. No one in Kherah made maps more

accurately and seamlessly than he did, and the other Temples paid dearly for his talent. But Reng hated me. Until I came along, he'd been the best at all of our sports, dancing, music, and other skills the morev were required to learn. My extra dose of Devi blood gave me the ability to outdo him, and he was jealous.

I wound my way around the cubicles where Reng's students were working until I reached his office. I knocked on his door, wondering if he would help me. He could be stingy that way. I'd have to resort to flattery if I was to get anything out of him. "Come in," a voice said. I opened the door and stepped inside.

Reng looked up and gave me a smile that didn't reach his eyes. "Greetings, Moreva Tehi. I hear you're taking a little trip." His voice dripped with false good cheer.

"Greetings, Morevi Reng. Yes, I am." I smiled back, my grin just as fake. "I'm looking forward to it."

Reng's grin faltered a bit. He obviously wasn't expecting my reply. "So," he said, recovering his composure, "what can I do for you?"

"Well, I'd like to know more about the Syren Pterritory. Everyone knows you have the best maps in Kherah, and I'd like to take a look at it before I leave."

Reng preened a little. "Of course. Just let me get the projector."

I waited in silence while he cleared his cluttered desk. Then he stepped over to an enormous cabinet. Opening the door, he pulled out a squat, black box with five striations on one side. I watched him set up the projector and switch it on. Nothing seemed to happen. Even with my Devi-enhanced hearing I couldn't hear anything from the black box, not even a quiet hum.

Turning back to the cabinet, he studied its contents. Then he removed a small tube from its slot. Twisting off the lid, he shook an even smaller clear cylinder into the palm of his hand.

Walking back to the desk, he dropped the cylinder into a little round hole on top of the projector I hadn't noticed. As soon as he did so, a picture bloomed on the other side of his office. It was like looking through a window.

"Ready?" Reng said.

I nodded. Together, we walked across the office to the picture. I halted. "Now what?"

"Step inside."

I did and wished I hadn't. I was at least a thousand *šīzu* above the ground. I windmilled my arms as if that would do anything to keep me from falling.

Reng grabbed one of my arms. I looked up. He was smirking. "Relax. This is just a holo, remember?"

I ducked my head, feeling sheepish. "Sorry—it seemed so real."

"I aim to please."

I gazed down at the land, crisscrossed by paved roads and bridged rivers. Peris's three suns—in the hologram, it was summer—reflected off the water, bright pinpoints of light that winked in and out like a festival display. I was surprised. I'd expected to see dirt paths instead of roads and certainly no bridges.

"So where do you want to go?" Reng said.

I raised my brows. I hadn't thought about that. "I don't know...I guess I just wanted to see it."

"Let's go for a walk, then. Here—hold on to me."

I took his hand, and we floated downward. Along the way, I marveled at how life-like everything looked. We reached the ground and landed on a wide, paved road with a light green stripe snaking along its middle. We walked. I took a deep breath. I smelled the trees and flowers.

Birds sang. The pavement was hard beneath my slippers. A slight breeze ruffled my hair. I would never have believed I was inside a hologram.

“Reng, how do you know what the Perritory smells and sounds like?”

His face lit up with a delighted smile. “I don’t. I made it up based on what others have told me.” He turned. “Do you like it?”

“It’s amazing.”

Reng preened again.

We had walked about seventy or eighty nindan when I stopped in my tracks. A series of huge caves had been cut into the mountainside, dwarfing the pieces of what looked like machinery crawling before them. I gasped. “What is that?”

“The thalin mines. Most of our supplies come from here.” He turned to me. “Not much more to see in this segment. Want to go back? I could show you Mjor, the village where you’ll be staying.”

I shook my head. “That’s all right. I just wanted to see what the Perritory looked like, that’s all.” A rumbling sound, very close by, made me turn. My eyes widened. A blue, monstrous-looking vehicle was bearing down on us, and it was too late to run. “Reng!” I screamed.

He turned around and smiled. He spread his arms wide. “Watch.”

I couldn’t have looked away if I’d tried. My feet were rooted to the spot. All I saw was the vehicle’s grill growing closer and closer until it was all I could see. I waited for the impact.

There was none. I goggled and spun around. The huge vehicle trundled away. It had gone right through us as if we weren’t there.

Reng grinned. “We’re in a holo, Tehi. Did you forget again?” He sniffed. “I can’t believe they still use wheels. Air vehicles are so much more superior. Well, they are a little backward up here. You’ll see.” He looked at me. “Ready?”

“Yes.” We rose from the pavement. I watched the perrain recede. We glided through the air and in moments were back where we started. “All right, here we are,” Reng said. “Just step forward.”

I did so, and then I was back in Reng’s office. I turned. The holo map was still there. Reng walked over to his desk and behind my back. The window disappeared before my eyes. I looked over my shoulder. “You mentioned this was a segment. Are there more?”

“Yes. When I’m finished making this portion of the map, I’ll put them together so you could go on for da-na.”

I nodded and made to leave. “Thank you, Reng. That was simply wondrous. You really are a genius.” My admiration was heartfelt.

Reng narrowed his eyes as if judging whether I was serious or not. He apparently decided I was, because a wide grin split his face. “Anytime, Tehi. Anytime.”

I left Reng’s office and made my way back through the cubicles. It was past time for me to be in my lab. Thank Astoreth I wasn’t on clinic duty today. *All those stupid, stinking hakoi...* I cut off the thought. That kind of thinking was what got me into trouble in the first place. I exited the cartography department and took the elevator down to the basement floor, where my lab was located. Pushing the door open, I noticed several of my morev colleagues hovering over their stations, their expressions intense. I arrived at my station and put on my protective jacket. I wouldn’t be working today, but habits are habits. I picked up my electronic tablet, opened a new page, and wandered about my station deciding which items to take. I spoke my needs in a normal

voice, disturbing my colleagues without a care on my part. Of course, I wouldn't be taking anything from this lab. I couldn't. A portable lab is just that—portable. The equipment is half, and sometimes a quarter of full-sized. The only equipment that was full-sized was things like forceps and droppers. But by judicious choosing, I could have a full-fledged lab in Mjor, if only in miniature. My lips twisted. *What difference does it make if I can't work on finding the cure for red fever? I'll lose a year's worth of effort, and someone else might find it before I do.* Then my eyes widened. *Wait. I can still work. If I take a portable sterile environment, the lab will have everything I need. And the red fever vials are small enough I can easily sneak them out of here. Besides, I only need one. Well, maybe two. And I need hairless skratzes for other experiments, anyway.* Then I thought about Astoreth's order not to take my project with me. *If I find the cure while I'm in the Syren Perritory, I doubt she'll punish me. And if I'm the first to develop it, my cure could make the Temple a lot of talents. She might even make me the head of research.* I smiled at the thought.

The bells rang for lunch. I put down my tablet, took off my jacket, and hung it on its peg. Then I followed the other morevs to the dining room. When I arrived, I saw Moreva Quora, my archenemy, sitting in my accustomed seat. Fifteen years older than me, Quora detested me because until my birth she'd been Astoreth's favorite.

"Out of my seat, Quora."

Quora looked up and smiled. "Why, Tehi—we'd thought you'd be in the Syren Perritory by now."

"You know very well the supply airship doesn't leave until the day after tomorrow. So out of my seat."

“No. I don’t see your name on it. What are you going to do, run to our Most Holy One and complain?”

Now it was my turn to smile. Standing at the far side of the round table, I placed my hands on the table’s edge and leaned forward. “If you don’t, I’ll put a simi in your bed. Maybe two.” Simi were long, thin, harmless snakes with a penchant for hiding in crevasses. A bed, with its sheets, mattress, and pillows, was an ideal place for them. And Quora was afraid of snakes.

Quora’s face paled. She knew I’d do it, too.

Without another word, Quora rose from my seat and went to find another one. I straightened, walked around the table to my chair and plopped into it. I looked around. Everyone was staring at me. “What?”

“You didn’t have to do that,” Morevi Sabo said. Sabo worked in the lab with me.

“She was in my seat.”

Just then, our food arrived, and conversation ceased. I sniffed the delicious aroma of my plate of sagra, maeli, and other assorted vegetables. I was famished. I wanted to devour it, but we had to wait for the blessing. Morevi Prian rose from his chair. I let out a little groan. He was one of the older morevs, well-respected for his work in astronomy. The only problem was that he tended to ramble.

After what seemed like an hour, the blessing had been given, and we were allowed to eat. Now, instead of hot, my food was just warm. Normally, I would have sent it back to the kitchen for reheating but I was hungry enough not to care. I finished before anyone else at the table. Etiquette dictated I should wait until at least two other morevs had finished eating before getting up from the table, but I didn’t feel like being polite. I rose from my chair and took my plate to

the cart positioned at one end of the dining room. One of the kitchen hakois would come for the cart when it was full of dirty dishes.

I returned to the lab. I had only a few more decisions to make before I'd deem my portable lab workable. I put the finishing touches on my list and was just about to drag one of the trunks from the closet to start packing when the round, faceted jewel below my right shoulder holding my robe together beeped. I tapped it. "Moreva Tehi."

"Moreva, this is Mehmed. Please come to your room. I am ready for your final fitting."

"Can't we do this later? I was just getting ready to pack up my lab."

"No, Moreva. I must have enough time to make your uniforms. Any later than now and you will not be ready to leave on the supply airship. The Most Holy One would not be pleased."

"Oh, all right." My grandmother was already angry with me, and it wouldn't do to anger her even more. I set the trunk down in front of my workstation and left the lab. My lab mates were just coming back from lunch. I didn't speak to them nor did they speak to me. I walked along the hallway until I came to the bank of elevators. Pressing the button, one set of elevator doors whisked open. I stepped aboard and rode to the main floor. Exiting this elevator, I traversed another, longer hallway until I came to another bank of elevators. These would take me to the morev dormitory. I pushed the call button and waited, growing more irritated by the second. The dormitory elevators, unlike the elevators in every other part of the Temple, were notoriously slow. A cab arrived four minutes later. I stepped inside. "Three."

Reaching my floor, I exited the cab and walked to my room. The door was standing open, which meant Mehmed was already inside. My lips tightened. There was precious little privacy in the dormitory. Our rooms had doors, but they didn't lock. Anyone could walk in at any time. Everyone knew better than to walk into my room without being invited because, with my extra

dose of Devi blood, I could not only sense someone had been in there but her identity, too. That person might enter their room next to find clothes strewn about on the floor, or the mirror smashed. But Mehmed, though a hakoi, was a special case. He made all of our clothes and could easily alter a garment so that it did not fit perfectly, which is what the Most Holy One demanded from her morevs. A morev in ill-fitting clothes was subject to punishment in whatever way suited Astoreth's whim. Sometimes those whims involved torture—the kind that left no marks.

I entered my room to find Mehmed and a fitting robot standing before a three-way mirror they'd brought with them. "Here is your uniform," Mehmed said, handing me a dark red blouse and a matching pair of trousers. "Please put it on."

I stripped to my undergarments and put on the uniform. The legs were slightly too long, as were the sleeves. It was made from some heavy material that felt uncomfortable given that I usually wore light gowns beneath my robe. "Stand here, please," Mehmed said, indicating a small stool positioned in front of the mirror. I took off my slippers and mounted it.

"Do not move, please."

I centered myself and pretended I was one of the metal flagpoles in front of the Temple. "Excellent, excellent," I heard Mehmed's voice. He spoke in whispers to the robot, which I assumed was dutifully storing my exact measurements into its memory. "Now please hold your arms out to the sides."

I did so. Mehmed whispered some more. Just when I was getting bored with being a flagpole, Mehmed announced he was finished. "This is your winter uniform. You will also have summer uniforms made of a lighter material. You will have plenty of each to last you a year. Your uniforms are embedded with an enzyme that will keep them fresh and crisp for about five

days before you must change into a new one. I will also include extra uniforms in case you need them.”

I looked down at a small dark rectangle sewn into the blouse under my right shoulder.

“What’s this?”

“It is a timepiece. All of the timepieces on your uniforms will be set to Syrenese Perritory time before you go. It will also be set for the time for Temple services. It is touch activated. Tap it once, ask for the time and it will give you the time. Ask how long before services begin and it will tell you that, too. It is also your alarm.”

“How will I know it’s on?”

“It will light up.”

“All right. How do I turn it on?”

“The timepiece will activate when you put on your uniform and stay activated until the battery wears out. The battery will last for half a marun, like the enzymes in the fabric.”

I took off my new uniform. After I had, I folded the blouse and the trousers once and gave them to Mehmed. He took them from me and made ready to leave.

“Thank you, Mehmed. May the Most Holy One turn Her face to you.”

“And to you, Moreva Tehi.” Mehmed nodded once and, with his fitting robot trundling behind carrying the mirror, left my quarters.

I dressed in my gown, sat on my bed, and blinked. *This is really happening...I’m leaving Uruk for the Syren Perritory in less than two days.* Somewhere in the back of my mind I’d been hoping Astoreth would change hers, but I now knew it wasn’t going to happen. Tears sprouted from my eyes and ran down my cheeks. Soon I was sobbing again, except this time there was no one around to hear it.

Eventually, my tears dried and I rose from the bed. If I was to be sent into exile, I needed to get my portable lab packed. I left my room and retraced my steps to the basement lab. Inside, I opened the trunk I'd placed in front of my table and picked up my tablet. I looked over the notes I'd made. Then I started packing.

I didn't think as I packed. Like an automaton, I simply followed my notes, retrieving conical flasks, beakers, pipettes and the like, and stowing them away in the first of two white trunks. By dinnertime, I was almost finished. Just a few more pieces of equipment and the vials of red fever and the portable lab would be ready to go to the Syren Perritory.

But would I?