

## Chapter 1

“Blessed Lady, give me strength,” I whispered, bending low to rest my forehead on the foot of the Goddess, the cool stone soothing against my face. I looked up and her serene visage stared down kindly upon me. *Grant me peace, benevolent mother.*

I bowed and moved back, allowing other worshippers to make their own requests. I took a seat near a pillar, watching the steady stream of supplicants, some bearing incense, others clutching flowers. The priestesses smiled at them all, accepting the occasional gift for the Lady. I knew the priestesses well, of course, since I saw them every day. They were also technically my employers, though in reality the temple elders managed the school and the small infirmary, as well as other charitable works by the temple. The priestesses did much good work in giving comfort to the distressed and advice to those seeking the Lady’s help when their lives had become too painful to endure. At times, this temple felt more like home than my parents’ house.

Closing my eyes, I let the peace of this place wash over me. I always felt calmer when I came here. The ritual, the routine, of my faith gave me an anchor and a discipline to replace what I’d set aside, quite willingly, seven years ago. That discipline acted as a halter on my sensual nature, and I accepted it as necessary and right.

I stayed a little longer but was expected at home, so eventually I sighed and rose to leave. A quiet voice to my side startled me.

“And does the Lady grant your wish, Jerna?”

I turned and started in shock as I recognised the newcomer emerging from the cool shadows.

“Kimis! What are you doing here?”

“I’ve moved back — a week ago in fact. I’m sorry, I didn’t let you know because things were so uncertain until just before we left,” Kimis said, taking my hand and planting a kiss of welcome on my cheek.

That brief, chaste touch and the ever-present sensuality in Kimis’ dark eyes sent a sudden unwanted flood of warm desire through me, as if it had been but seven days since I’d last seen him in the flesh, not nearly seven years. He looked good, as always, black hair starting to streak with grey. It suited him. His figure was as trim and slim as always, and he’d only become more handsome with success and growing authority in his profession.

I knew from his slight smile he’d seen his effect on me, blast him. He knew me too damn well. I stepped back a careful distance, reminding him — and me — things were no longer as they had been in the past. I noticed my former master was not alone, and he saw where I was looking.

“Ah, Jerna, please meet Davim. My apprentice from Rezsolto.”

The young man came forward, and his beauty struck me immediately. Slight and blond, with soulful blue eyes, he seemed almost like one of the Lady’s children, whose images surrounded us on the walls and ceilings.

“Hello,” he said in a low, sweet voice. “I’m Davim Korei.”

I took his slender hand. “Jerna Setiq. Welcome to Liselto, Davim.” The other worshippers were giving us some disapproving looks. “Come outside, Kimis, so we can talk.”

He nodded, placing a proprietary hand on his apprentice’s shoulder. The sun was an hour from setting, but the early summer’s afternoon was still very hot. We took refuge under one of the large spreading trees in the temple garden.

“I thought you were permanently settled in Rezsolto,” I said to Kimis.

I glanced at Davim, who smiled at me before turning his attention to his master again. I realised with considerable surprise he was much younger than I'd first thought — surely not more than sixteen. Most apprentices were seventeen or eighteen before they began their indentures, especially in a profession such as architecture, although sixteen was legal age.

“Well, you know, I got homesick — missed old friends,” he said with a wink and a slight leer. I took no notice of it, since with him, it was habitual. “Coms are all very well and good, but they're no substitute for seeing people. Besides, Jik Hartwe offered me a partnership — you know he wants to retire, and I thought it a good investment. Davim's a promising lad, and I felt this was an opportunity for him to get a little experience and spread his wings. Wasn't that right, Davim?”

“Yes, m...sir.”

Kimis smiled benevolently and patted the boy's knee. “Anyway, I've taken a lease on a house in Ladyplace, and I'll expect to have you there soon, Jerna. Tyrme as well, of course,” he added politely.

I doubted he meant the invitation enthusiastically. Tyrme had caused a catastrophic breach in my relations with Kimis, simply because I'd fallen in love with her. True, she'd also helped to mend the breach, and Kimis had departed south with our friendship restored, but I'd always wondered if he'd ever really forgiven her for being the cause of his losing his favourite submissive. She had been unaware of the exact nature of my relationship with Kimis, and I was happy for that lack of awareness to continue. All of that was in the past, I told myself firmly, though it was hard, with Kimis right there, not to respond to him as I'd have found so natural seven years before.

“Will you come to dinner if I ask?”

“Of course we'll come,” I said, “and you've still not met my little girls, have you?”

“Lady's love, no, I haven't. I confess, my dear boy, the idea of you as a father is something I really have trouble comprehending.”

“Come visit and watch me play Papa, and you'll believe it,” I said with a rueful grin. “They have me wrapped around their little fingers, the little devils.”

“Ah, now, that I can believe. You were always so soft-hearted.”

“No more than you, Kimis.”

Davim watched us as we bantered and now gave me a shy smile. He really was very beautiful, and I wondered if his nature was as sweet as his face.

“Was it chance you met me today?” I asked.

“Ah, not entirely, though I fully intended to call on you, if that's what you were asking,” he said, wagging an admonishing finger at me for daring to question his manners. “I wanted someone to take charge of Davim's schooling. His father insisted that he had to complete the state curriculum before he'd consent to allowing the articles to be drawn up. I've got him on the correspondence course, and I thought if you were prepared to take on a little private tutoring, oversee his progress and so on, then between that and his work in the office, he'll be brought to the correct standard in time for the spring examinations next year. After that, he will enrol in the preparatory architecture course at the guild school. Of course, I'd pay you well for your trouble.”

I dismissed his unnecessary assurance. Kimis had always been open-handed with his money.

“It'll be a pleasure, though I warn you, Davim, you'll need to work hard. I'm a stern taskmaster.”

“Oh, he likes that,” Kimis said, leering this time at his apprentice. Davim blushed, but unease began to coil in my gut at the way Kimis looked at him. It was habit, I told myself. Kimis looked at most people that way, and indeed, now he smiled at having embarrassed his assistant. It seemed to be just teasing they were both used to, and I

relaxed again. "Then it's settled, and I won't keep you, Jerna. You must want to go back to your domestic pleasures. We're at Chattings' house in Ladyplace — shall I expect you tomorrow? Where do you wish Davim to have his lessons?"

"Actually, it'd be better for him to come here to the temple school. Davim, I want you to come at four initially, for two hours, four days each week, less or more later, depending on how we get on. Tomorrow, I'll find out how far in the curriculum you've studied, and then we'll begin."

"Thank you, Jerna," he said. "I'm very grateful for your assistance."

"Jerna's the best in this city, Davim. Squandering your mind, my lad," Kimis added to me in a severe tone. "Your father had high hopes of you, with that education."

And didn't I know that, I thought with a sigh. Papa did like to bend my ear on the subject. "I like being a teacher. The children keep me young."

Kimis clapped me on the shoulder as he stood.

"Well it's not like you have to worry about earning a living, not with that rich wife you managed to snag for yourself."

I frowned at him, not caring for the comment, but he didn't seem to notice my annoyance.

"Davim will come at four then, and I'll begin planning for a dinner in your honour — you and your lovely family, of course."

I nodded in agreement. "I'll see you tomorrow," I said to Davim. "I'm glad you came back, Kimis. It's not the same by letter or com."

"No, indeed. Tomorrow, my friend."

I watched them walk off, then sighed. One really couldn't go down the same road twice, I thought, and though more than once I'd sensed Kimis' wish to do so — perhaps even sensed it in myself from time to time — things had changed forever between us. Still, I was glad my old master had come back to our city and also glad of the tutoring request. It would ease my conscience about Davim. As a father, I couldn't help but worry about such a young boy living so far away from his parents.

I looked at the temple, wondering if the Lady would grant me what I'd asked for so many times. The problem with the Goddess was that she was benevolent, but her benevolence often tended to work in rather mysterious ways. Of course, she might just be testing me, to see if I was worthy of her gift. I sighed again. If the Lady wished it, my inconvenient desires would cease to torture me, and if she didn't, I'd have to do as I'd done for the last seven years and endure.

The reason that such endurance was far more joy than pain waited for me at the doorstep of our home.

"Papa! Papa!" Eljira cried, running down the path so I could swing her up. "We made you a cake, Papa!"

"Did you now, my lovely? That was nice of you. Did Neras help you?"

Carrying my older daughter on my hip, I walked up to where Tyrme was watching me with a smile, Neras in her arms. I kissed my wife on the cheek.

"Hello, darling. Neras, did you help your sister?"

"Yes, Papa," she whispered, then buried her face in Tyrme's shirt.

I ruffled my youngest's hair and kissed the top of her head. "Then thank you, too. Oooph," I said, as Eljira's bouncing made my bones creak. "Eljira, you're getting so tall, your poor Papa's back is breaking."

"Is not," she retorted. "You're just getting old."

Tyrme grinned at me. "She has you there, my love."

"True, true. Now, where is this wonderful cake? I must gaze at its magnificence."

"*Silly Papa*," my elder child pronounced with a very disgusted shake of her head.

"Yes, well, it's all that getting old, you see."

The cake was indeed wonderful, if rather lopsided, and decorated with some indistinct design that, try as I might, I could not decipher, until Eljira lost patience with my pathetic attempts, and haughtily announced that it said “Made for Papa”.

“I’m sorry — I’ll have to go back to school and improve my letters,” I said, hanging my head.

Eljira giggled. “Then there wouldn’t be a teacher! That would be silly, Papa!”

“Hmmm, perhaps you’re right. Maybe I’d have to make you the teacher instead?”

“I’d be the best teacher in the whole world,” she declared, and I had no doubt she would be indeed. I loved my oldest daughter, so full of confidence and intelligence. But then her sister was charming and kind, a perfect complement to Eljira’s bright light. I adored them both.

We put our two girls to bed after supper and then shared a quiet glass of wine in the sitting room, Tyrme’s head resting on my shoulder. I waited for her to share the latest news from the family business — how bumper grain crops were pushing prices down, but there was a shortage of requel dye nationwide because of a mine explosion in the west, so people were scrambling to stockpile what they could — before I told her Kimis was back in town.

She sat up and looked at me in surprise. “Kimis? Just like that? Why didn’t he write, or call?”

I still puzzled over that myself, but Kimis had always been a law unto himself. “He was never one for letters, love, you know that, and he doesn’t like using the com to talk. Anyway, he’s taken the Chattings’ house in Ladyplace. He’s got a young fellow with him, a new apprentice. He wants me to tutor him, and I’ve agreed.”

“Oh. That’ll be a lot of extra work,” she said, looking less than happy. “Did you have to accept, Jerna?”

“Well, Davim’s very young in a new place. I thought it would be kind. It’s only for a few months — until the spring examinations — and only for a couple of hours in the evenings.”

“I know,” she said doubtfully. “But that’s the girls’ time with you.”

“Yes, love, I know that too. I’ll make sure they don’t lose out. Davim’s a very nice young lad. You’d like him.”

“I’m surprised his family agreed to him being taken so far from them.”

I wondered about that too. “Making sure he finishes his education was important to their agreement, and Kimis *is* one of the country’s best architects. It’s a wonderful opportunity for him.”

“Perhaps. Well, we should have him to tea. I’d like to meet him.”

“You will, Tyrme. Kimis plans to have us all over for supper. I suppose they’ll need a little while to settle in.”

She stroked the rim of her glass thoughtfully. “I can’t imagine why he would move from Rezelto back here. He was getting so much work there. I thought he had a huge practice set up.”

“He says he’s homesick, and he had an advantageous offer from old Jik Hartwe. I don’t understand these matters, Tyrme. I’d send us broke in a month if I ran your business.”

She laughed and kissed me. “That you would, darling. You have many talents, but accounts and trading aren’t among them.”

I pulled her into my lap and buried my nose between her breasts, inhaling her scent.

“Then let me show you some of my many other talents,” I said, lifting my face and giving her a sly look.

She giggled, the façade of the canny, respectable businesswoman and mother dropping away to reveal the sweet-tempered girl I'd courted and won years ago. I carried her off to bed — my love, my wife, my blessing. Just one of the many reasons my life was rich and happy, and why I'd continue to offer prayers to Lady Aioe that I would not ever do a single thing to threaten it.

Davim was punctual, I was pleased to note, arriving at the schoolroom door just minutes after I'd returned from the temple. He was demurely dressed in a well-cut jacket and high collared shirt, looking every inch the proto-professional, and carrying a wallet containing his school transcripts. He waited patiently while I checked them. He was a very good student, I saw, strong in mathematics and physics, but also doing well in design and art. Weaker in language and literature, I noted.

"Don't like your classics, Davim?"

"I just find the stories so dull, Master Setiq."

"Please, just call me Jerna, or 'sir' if my students are around. Well, you need to overcome your dislike, my lad, since you have to achieve high scores for language to get the leaving certificate. You want to be an architect, you need to discover a way into the glories of our past." I laughed at his sour look. "Don't worry. I've had more reluctant students than you and never had a failure in that subject."

That first session only laid out our plan. I needed to find out how much spare time he had, what books he owned and which he'd need to borrow, and what access he had to a com. Kimis supplied him generously, but I was a little concerned at Davim's insistence that his evenings were too heavily occupied with his apprenticeship duties to allow much time for study.

"Davim, you're attempting something which is already difficult even for a full-time student. My tutoring can guide you, but you must find several hours each day, even when we don't meet, to cover your course work. I'll speak to Kimis—"

"No! Master Setiq...Jerna, please, don't!" I raised an eyebrow at his passion. "I don't want him to think I need...I can do it through the day, honest."

"Hmmm. Very well. For now, I'll let you organise it, for it's an important skill a young professional needs. But I won't allow you to fall behind, Davim. There are expected milestones on this course, and Kimis wants you to do well. I can't imagine what you're required to do in the evening that is more important than your studies."

He looked down at the desk. "It is. Very important. Please, Jerna."

"I already said I'd agree, lad, so don't mope. Now, let's look at the poetry and see if there's something you can find an interest in."

I was a little troubled by Davim's odd insistence on that point. There really was a lot of work for him to do, and he was young to be sitting the examinations, though so far as intellect was concerned, he was undoubtedly able. He seemed determined enough, but I worried he was becoming carried away with the more interesting work of his architectural designs, and would neglect the dull studies he was almost certainly desperate to put behind him and move into the adult world. The only reassuring thing was learning he was closer to seventeen than sixteen, not quite as young as I'd first thought. It made the apprenticeship more understandable, and he was certainly in an enviable position for a would-be architect.

He continued as he began, and after three weeks, I thought he'd probably do as well as I'd hoped. Each day he arrived promptly at four, and just as he promised, he managed all of the exercises and essays set for him. He'd even begun on *Tribulations*, one of the most revered, if tedious, of our classic novels, and had found the character of Leis, the villain, rather more enthralling than that of Razil, the hero. I'd also felt that way when I'd read the book at thirteen.

“At first he’s all appetite, don’t you think?” I said, after Davim had expressed his opinion.

“Yes,” he agreed eagerly, “but then he starts to understand why he feels that way. Razil’s just this blundering fool. He does everything for duty, but never understands why. Leis is evil, but he’s intelligent.”

“Which makes him dangerous, of course. Good, Davim — this is the kind of analysis you will need in the exam. But as you read on, I want you to look at how the author is creating the impression of Leis’ intelligence. Does she just tell us about it, or is she showing us? And is she doing the same thing with the other characters?”

“I think she prefers Leis to Razil.”

“That would be odd, don’t you think?” I said casually, though his realisation secretly pleased me. “I mean, Leis is repulsive, a dreadful criminal and sinner. Razil is good and honest and devoted.”

“But he’s *boring*. If she really liked him, she’d make him...I don’t know...interesting?”

“Perhaps. Read to the end and see what you think then. Now, pass me your chemistry text, and we’ll look at the section that was giving you difficulty.”

He turned a little quickly and knocked the book to the floor. He blushed and bent to pick it up. It was only fleeting, but I saw an expression of pain pass over his face.

“Are you hurt, Davim?”

“No, sir.”

“You’re wincing. Is your back injured? Should I call a doctor?”

“No, Jerna, please leave it.”

He bit his lip, and I was convinced he had lied to me. “Davim,” I said gently. “What’s wrong with your back?”

“Nothing. Please, don’t ask me.”

“Davim, I’m duty-bound as your teacher to report injury or illness to your guardian.”

His pale cheeks showed high spots of colour as he continued to chew his bottom lip. “It’s nothing, Jerna. Kimis already knows about it.”

It could have been an accident at home, but his embarrassment, and what I knew of Kimis’ tastes, suddenly gave me the unwanted answer to my question. I wished I could convince myself that his blushes were virginal, but I couldn’t. It was all I could do to hide my shock and to try and behave normally.

“Very well. Page one hundred and thirty-four, please.”

He didn’t seem to think anything was amiss, and I managed to discuss his chemistry studies with a semblance of professional calm. I dismissed him shortly afterwards, a half hour earlier than normal, since I was simply too disturbed by what I’d learned to concentrate.

I didn’t know what was worse — that Kimis was most likely sleeping with the boy, or that he’d apparently taken him as a slave. I’d been eighteen when Kimis had shown an interest in me, but it had been almost a year before we had entered into our bond, and I was much more mature and worldly than Davim, fully able to consent and understand the agreement. Davim was innocent, sweet, and naïve. I had difficulty believing he really knew what he was getting into.

I stared into space for a good few minutes, trying to decide what to do. Finally, I went to my desk and called Kimis’ office, asking him to meet me in the temple immediately. We were supposed to visit his house tomorrow, but I couldn’t bring my daughters into that situation, nor give it the seal of approval by bringing my wife.

I'd need all my wisdom and patience to deal with Kimis on this, and so I did a meditation exercise as I waited. So deep was I in my thoughts that I jumped violently when a hand descended heavily on my shoulder.

"Jerna? Are you unwell? You look pale." Kimis seemed truly concerned — ironic, in the circumstances.

"I'm fine," I said, struggling to compose myself. "Outside, please."

He followed me out without a word and then regarded me gravely. "Is something wrong? Has something happened to Davim?"

"Yes, you could say that. Why are you beating your apprentice?"

His eyes narrowed, and the brief flash of hate in them shocked me. He rose and walked off a little. I checked we weren't being overheard, though the risk was all his, not mine. I had no desire to see him flogged in the main square.

"Didn't take you long to pry into my affairs, did it?"

"If you're going to beat your lover so hard that he's injured, of course I'll notice."

"I beat you just as hard. And you begged me for it, just as he does."

I noticed he didn't deny Davim was his lover. "I was an *adult*. He's just a *child*. How could you?"

"I love him. He's not a child to me. He's the man I want to spend the rest of my life with. And he feels the same about me."

"Kimis, he's sixteen," I hissed at him. "He's years from being a man — how can he know what he wants to do with the rest of his life? What if it hadn't been me who'd discovered his injuries? What if it had been Tyrme, or one of the people in your office? You're running an appalling risk, but worse than that, you're utterly denying him a chance of a normal childhood. I'm telling you to stop. Even if — especially if — you love him, you must stop until he's of age."

He paled. "I can't. He'd never forgive me."

"Then his affection isn't as undying as you thought. I mean it. I can't look away. Damn it, I'm a father and a teacher. How on earth do you expect me to react?"

"I expect you to trust me. You know me. You know I'm worthy of trust."

"I thought you were, but then I never thought you'd do something like this. I mean it. You must leave him alone until he's eighteen or..."

His chin came up. "Or...you'll report me?"

"Will you force me to? At the very least, I should write to his parents and tell them he's in moral danger. Look, if you want him to be a submissive, you don't need to beat him or sleep with him. You can collar him without laying a finger on him, though I think he's too young for it."

"That's for him to decide, don't you think?"

I shook my head in exasperation. "He's just a child. You're talking about him as if he's a man, and he's not. Are you so blinded by lust?"

"I just happen to know him rather better than you. He's no innocent, and not as naïve as you're making out. I asked you — are you going to report me?"

"Are you going to stop?"

He turned away, and rested his forehead against the tree. "You don't understand," he murmured. "I love him. I'd do anything for him. It was his idea to come back, to study at the guild school. If he'd wanted to move to Serelto, or to the middle of nowhere, I would have done it. He fills my thoughts, every waking moment. I just want him to be happy. He's truly my master, not I his."

I laid a hand on his shoulder. "I understand the wish to make him happy, and Davim is a beautiful lad," I said kindly. "But your love can bear a little test, surely. It's only just over a year. You can still help him and make him happy without the rest of it."

Think of it as a trial. You were always good at thinking them up. Now's your chance to bear it for a change."

He gave me a wry look. "There's a reason I'm a dominant, you know. You won't be swayed, will you?"

"No, I won't. And I can't bring my children to your house until I know things have changed. I just can't, Kimis."

That hurt him almost as much as the rest of it, I thought.

"I've made you ashamed of me."

"No, because you're prepared to do this for me and for him. I'll pray that your future lives will be long and happy together, but you must not begin like this."

"He'll be furious with me. And you."

I shrugged. "He'll get over it. Now I know why his evenings are so full. That has to stop too, Kimis. The boy needs to apply himself to his studies. The time will pass quickly for both of you."

"I doubt it, but you have my word of honour. Is that good enough for you?"

"Yes, it is. I was always prepared to trust you, and I am glad to see my faith is still so well-founded, old friend."

He patted my hand, still resting on his shoulder. "I'd never have looked at him if you were still my slave, Jerna."

I ignored the barb. We'd not had that kind of relationship, and he knew it. "I am, and always will be, grateful for your discipline, Master Kimis. It taught me a lot about myself, and I'm a better, wiser man for it."

"Is that why you spend so much time praying to the Lady? Have you merely exchanged one master for another? Another collar?"

He was getting too near the knuckle, taking a petty revenge for being thwarted that I knew was not his true nature. Things would descend into acrimony if I stayed.

"It's no longer your concern," I said mildly. "Go home and tell him. He'll need your love and patience."

"Patience, certainly. Our young man has a temper on him, let me tell you. Very well. I'll tell my housekeeper tomorrow's supper is postponed — but not cancelled?"

"Not cancelled, no. In a couple of weeks, perhaps."

"Good. And thank you. I appreciate the hold you have over me."

"I don't see it that way, and I never would."

He nodded and walked off. I rubbed my eyes, my hands shaking slightly as I watched Kimis' slim back disappear down the street. I'd never expected to have such a conversation with my old master, and it hurt to have to do so. I'd brought heartache to my friend and the boy he claimed to love — did love, I was sure — but there was nothing for it. Too much was at stake, too much was wrong about the entire situation. At least Kimis had realised it too. I thanked the Lady for her help in giving me the strength to stand up to him and for keeping me calm. I'd pray that Kimis and Davim could weather this brief delay in their relationship and emerge stronger and more in love than before. The age difference would always pose a problem for them, but I'd known more unlikely partnerships succeed.

Then I went home, knowing I could not unburden myself to Tyrme on this, wishing there was no need for secrecy, but this was not my secret, and not mine to set free.