



Prologue

The World-That-Is, 1612

DEMETRICE SNOOZED, A CUP of tea at her side, a book face down on her stomach. Four weeks in the mountains, slogging through snow, mud, blood and now...home. She snuggled deeper into the cushions and pulled the quilt to her chin. A little nap before Seth would come to her chamber for a nice supper. She smiled in anticipation of a lovely evening. A glass of wine—

Pain flared in her right knee—her tic, a sure sign that trouble was afoot. Demetrice bolted upright and extended her senses. Something...no...someone was at the Gate, someone who shouldn't be there.

A death...

Throwing the covers off, she hastily threw on her battlecoat and buckled on her sword.

Then another death—quick, but painful. She crooked her finger and summoned her gems from the Ladies' altars. Sword in hand, she stepped a thousand miles in an instant from her terrace at Castle Sonnenberg to the Gate, deep below the mountain keep of the Heril royal family.

At the center of the large round chamber, a black-clad man stood before the stone plug that trapped the Enemy on the other side. At his feet, bloody corpses, the bodies of the slaughtered Heril guards, littered the ground. Arms open wide and fingers contorted, he sang a spell. A fog of vaporized blood wafted upwards from the guards' bodies, filling the air with a foul stench and the tang of corrupted iron. His spell coagulated it, turning the blood of the murdered Herils into streams of black energy that flaked and chipped at Mediana's seal at the top of the stone plug. At the small explosion of air that accompanied Demetrice's stepping, he turned.

Tiago?

She rushed her apprentice, sword held high. "Why?"

"You didn't save her." He smirked—then died, her sword through his heart.

It didn't matter.

She was too late. The spell was complete. The old seal, shaped like an apple tree in full bloom, shattered. With a squeal that made her shoulders hunch and jaw clench, the iron bands securing the massive stone plugging the entrance to the Enemy's dimension peeled away as though wrenched apart by giant hands. The freed block, wide as two burly men, lurched forward, and the other seals crumbled.

Sixteen hundred years of relative peace—gone without warning.

Sickly green fog burst past the stone plug. Cold and thick, it engulfed Demetrice. Her stomach clenched, and she stifled the panic rising within her. She was protected by the charms she wore on her battlecoat, but those protections wouldn't last forever. One touch, one breath, and the malevolent substance turned a person into a monster, a servant of the Enemy. Muscles would spasm, and thick, green, ropy saliva would spill from the mouth. Froth—it was the first symptom of the change, and the name given to the fog itself. The sickly green cloud rushed past her towards the tunnels that snaked from the chamber to the surface. If she didn't stop it, then the Froth would flow over the land and turn every living thing it encountered into something hideous.

Her children, her people, everything that lived...

She had to stop it, stop the Enemy from entering their world.

Thrusting her sword into the ground, arms open wide, Demetrice rushed towards the stone, ignoring the tentacles worming their way through the gap. Straining, she pushed. The stone slid backward, then

rebounded as the Enemy pushed back. More tentacles emerged and slapped at her, attempting to dislodge her.

Demetrice's fingers twisted. Her mouth muttered a spell as she drew on the power of her gems, sparkling repositories of the Blessed Ladies' power. Their energy fueled the spells she shaped: sparks of electricity to bite, bolts of flame to burn, ice pellets to freeze, iron shards to cut, acid blasts to melt the appendages flailing at her.

The Enemy howled. The sound burst forth from a hundred mouths, then was reflected and distorted by the crystal-lined walls of his prison into an eardrum-shattering shriek. Froth surged through the Gate, obscuring Demetrice's vision.

A second later, it was gone in a blast of divine light and heat. Demetrice was no longer alone. Clad in shining suits of golden plate, their swords aflame, Holy Istana and her consort, Sir Anstell, manifested beside her. The temperature of the chamber rose from the heat exuded by the tall, golden-haired Goddess with the dark brown skin.

Maddened by their presence, the Enemy renewed his efforts to open the stone plug the rest of the way. The stone slid forward, an inch, two inches, but then the Bright Lady and her Paladin husband attacked. Swords flashed. Tentacles were severed. Others flinched away from the holy fire coating the blades. While the two swung their swords, Demetrice sang an irradiation into existence. Its bright, burning light drove the Enemy back, slowing the invasion of Froth, which once more seeped into the room.

Whimpering, the Enemy flinched away from the light. The pressure on the other side of the Gate lessened. Plastering their backs against the plug, the three pushed with all their might, stone scraping against stone, but the Enemy, Vella, had merely been gathering his strength. Ramming the Gate on one side, the stone plug opened like a door. Caught behind it, Istana crashed into the cave wall, then slid to the floor.

Blood soaked her golden hair. Her dark skin grew gray, her breath shallow.

Anstell yelled his wife's name.

There was no response.

Anstell's lone blue eye met Demetrice's. It was filled with anguish and indecision. The Paladin was caught between duty and love: save the world or save his wife.

“Go, Anstell. We can’t let it happen again,” urged Demetrice. Sixteen hundred years ago, they’d lost the God of Life and the Goddess of Earth, imprisoning the Enemy beyond the Gate. They could not lose the Bright Lady today.

“Demetrice Ana’allendenaya—”

“Needs must! I will hold the Gate.”

Anstell rushed to his wife’s side, cradled his Lady’s body in his arms, and stepped away. Demetrice ran around the plug and faced Vella. He was a mound of flesh, as sickly green as Froth, eyes everywhere, thousands of wiggling tentacles armed with pricklers and stingers, barbs and tiny mouths.

An elder God.

And what was she? Not a Goddess, not really, just a small woman with pointy ears, red hair, and green eyes with a penchant for meddling, but Demetrice was also stubborn, desperate, and a shaper of spells.

Gathering the gems in her hands, she drained them, filling herself with power. She held her hands to her heart, then flung them wide.

Light, so much light—sunlight and moonlight, the flash of lightning reflected on water, the sullen, red glow of molten rock, the blinking phosphorescence of fireflies at play, starshine and candle flames—every kind of light exploded out of her.

Vella screamed and collapsed backward.

Light is life. Light destroys dark just as life destroys death, and once upon a time, Vella had been the God of the Dark.

Demetrice spun, ground her back into the stone and backpedaled, pushing once again. She almost closed it. The Enemy’s stunned body was in the way, but she’d hurt him. His cold black blood pooled at her feet.

Closed, but not quite. Froth surged through the gap, once more flooding the chamber, gushing through caverns and cracks, seeking victims.

Drained yet determined, Demetrice slumped against the Gate and watched Froth leak from under the stone and through her feet.

Through?

Her gaze traveled across the floor. Bones, scraps of green cloth, a sword thrust into the earth, the glowing moonstone of its pommel banishing the rising clouds of Froth. Demetrice’s fingers twitched, and a ghostly twin of the moonblade, Kardaluna, flew to her hand.

A hand as translucent and incorporeal as the sword.
She had died and never noticed.

Voices filled her head—prayers to the Copper Raven, her other self, the divine spirit who ferries souls to the Sacred Groves.

'Help me, Grandmother.'

'Copper Raven, take me home.'

'Where are you? You promised you'd be there.'

'Great Lady!'

Demetrice looked across the chamber. The souls of the fallen Herils strained to rise above the roiling Froth. They were afraid, calling out to her, their inner light dimming as despair rose.

"My children..." she whispered. Her hand reached toward the souls.

A dozen deaths pricked at her mind, followed by dozens more from the Castle above the Gate. Her family was being slaughtered—those who worshiped Vella were coming to greet their God and free him.

The stone plug vibrated behind her. If she put on her feathers to take the souls of her children home, the Gate would open all the way, but if she didn't, then...

Her children would be lost.

Their souls were flickering. They were in pain, longing for the Sacred Groves, but they did not know the way.

More voices, her children dying on the surface...both Herils and Sonnenbergs.

Demetrice shuddered.

Please. A prayer from her heart to the universe.

Her soul split in two.

A wisp of Demetrice's soul put on wings and fled the Gate to gather the souls of her children to bring them home.

Most of her, the strongest part, remained at the Gate.