

# ONE

Niala Aminah Zahava knelt on the ground in front of five tall stones marking the altar to Gaea. The stones reached long fingers into the dusky blue sky of early evening as if seeking to connect the heavens to earth, as if to find the perfect balance between mortal and divine. The stones had been placed there long after Niala and her people first arrived in the valley. The stones represented the hand of the goddess, but to Niala, they held a deeper meaning. The five stones were set to honor her friends and companions who had made the trip with her.

The stones were bleached white, battered by the wind and rain during the many years they watched over Najahmara, yet still proudly stood against the horizon. In darkness, when moonlight poured over them like shimmering cloth and their shadows crossed the valley, Niala was once again caught up in the story of her journey to Najahmara.

Etched upon the face of each towering rock was the name of a priestess, one for each of the five who undertook the quest. Gently, she traced the name on one stone. How many years had it taken to reach Najahmara? Too many to remember. Shifting, Niala felt the weight of those years even now as she looked back on their struggles.

So long ago, it should all be forgotten, but she never would. She would always remember how she huddled on the busy docks of Athos, frightened and alone. How out of nowhere, appeared a woman, smiling and offering friendship. Layla, now dead, along with the other three women. Of the five who began the journey, Niala was the only one left.

Grief washed over her like the waves that rise and fall with the tide. It receded quickly, but the emptiness lingered. She simply could not bear another loss. She rubbed a hand across her forehead as if to wipe away the sadness and focus once again on the present. But the past still called to her, reminding her of the search for this valley. Five women, priestesses all, and a poor tribe of people who did not know their destination, but trusted that when they found it, the land would speak for itself.

## *Ruth Souther*

And it had, for when they opened their eyes upon the dawn that first morning in the valley, they were astonished. Weary and nearly drowned by a deluge the night before, they emerged from their wet bedding and bedraggled tents to see a meadow alive with sparkling drops of water nestled in a carpet of delicate purple flowers. The blooms rolled away from them in a blissful corridor that led right up to the sandy shores of twin rivers.

The Bayuk streamed down from the north and the Maendre pin-wheeled over from the east to meet at the west side of the valley. They created a glistening lake before continuing on their way across the land. A deep forest grew at the far end of the valley and to each side rose gentle cliffs, white, like the five standing stones. As the cliffs marched toward them, they formed a deep bowl, declining outward to meet the great meadow where they camped.

One river, yes, but two? They had followed the Bayuk for over six moons, never suspecting that it joined with its sister in a land of promise, the sacred land of the earth goddess herself. They felt Gaea's strength drawing them into the very heart of where she made her home. There they settled and carved out a tiny village that was now a thriving town filled with the sounds of happiness.

Najahmara, lying below the ridge in contented grace.

Just as the warmth of day was giving way to the coolness of evening, Niala's sense of peace was giving way to disquiet. For days, uneasiness crept over her in a slow migration throughout her body until it finally burst over her in a dread she could not shake. All around her, from the trees to the fields, upon the winds and in the waters, there was a constant warning that something in their land had changed. The past few days the fear increased and Niala felt the restlessness beneath her feet. The winds pulled at Niala's hair and whispered in the grasses of things to come. The waters gurgled of caution and even the skies grew clouded, hiding the sun far more than was usual.

There was no reflection of this in the faces of her people. They went about their lives as they always did and at this time of the seasons, it was with diligence they looked forward to the harvest. Fields of grains to reap, fruits to be dried, herbs to be gathered, and medicines to be prepared. Even after all these generations, they behaved as if they still sought to survive a brutal winter instead of a mild cooling of their lands. Except for Niala and a handful of others, there were none who had ever seen snow blanket the earth, yet she knew they would scurry about gathering and storing food as if they had suffered greatly from cold.

Even so, Niala thought, it is good, for even a warm land goes dormant at times. No one knew when there would be flood, famine, or worse. Niala thought of those things that could be worse, things best left unsaid.

Although there were no outward signs of disturbance, Niala knew it was there. It waited in the shadows, a dangerous creature stalking the unwary. There was a darkness settling over her land and the fear in her heart was

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choking. She had come to the windswept plateau to sit in front of the stones, as she did each evening, trying to understand the cause.

Forcing herself to quiet Niala settled back, eyes closed, she sought calm. She relaxed into silence with the chill of the air seeping into her skin and waited. The only response was a shivering of the earth. Niala sighed and absently smoothed one hand down the long, thick braid hanging over her shoulder. She let her mind empty into the vast open space of darkness without moon or stars that was her inner landscape. Bringing her breath into a rhythm, slow in, slow out, she felt her body grow heavy.

A hushed sighing swirled around her, rustling through the dry grasses as if a caressing hand trailed across the plateau. The wind stroked her arms and face, down her back and along her legs in an eager greeting as Gaea merged with her. For that was the way of Earth, to become a part of life and see the world about her through human eyes. If she spoke, it was with Niala's own lips and if she walked, it was with Niala's feet. It was a gift Niala gave willingly and with joy.

Gaea revealed what she would through visions, fragmented, diluted and many times difficult to understand. Niala waited with patience, for it was not Gaea's way to rush. Immediately, though, she felt Gaea's disappointment and sadness.

When the vision rose before her, it seemed as real to her as the stones themselves, as real as the birds darting about in the sky, or the grass she sat upon. Day turned to night and a figure stood at the edge of the plateau looking out across the valley. He was tall and imposing with a chest as thick as an ox. His shoulders were wide and strong with a straight, unforgiving back. He was built ruggedly but with a face as beautiful as the heavens and eyes black like the deepest night, as depthless as the seas and without mercy.

Niala knew him well. He was War.

She had deceived him and fled his embrace, hiding herself from him for countless generations. Trembling, she watched as he held his head cocked to one side, listening. She clamped her lips together to keep from crying out, tucking herself in as if to become invisible, but he did not advance toward her. He turned away toward the valley and fixed his gaze on Najahmara.

Niala crawled on hands and knees to the edge. Huddling on the brink, perilously near to falling over the side, Niala looked up at him. Silvery moonlight kissed his face, the broad sweep of forehead, the high arch of black brow, the straight, bold nose and full lips. Black curls lay to his neck, covering his ears, blending into the darkness of his clothing. His bearded chin was lifted, his countenance impassive.

He was exactly as she remembered him.

He did not look at her; his gaze remained on the valley, and so it was that her eyes were drawn downward. There she saw a swarm of men blanket

## *Ruth Souther*

Najahmara, an army of warriors sweeping down upon the quiet town in unyielding waves. Though it was distant and dark, she knew there was not one in Najahmara who could fight back, for they had no weapons. Silently, the men invaded and shrieks of pain and terror burst over her beloved home. The shadowy men struck down her people with wicked blades that glinted in the moonlight until the streets ran thick with blood.

No one but her.

Then, and only then, did War turn and look at her.

“No...” Niala cried out, reaching out to him, pleading. “No...”

War said nothing, but a cold and mirthless smile lifted the corners of his mouth. Niala shuddered and wept into her hands. When next she looked, the apparition had disappeared. Across the valley she saw no more than a serene town washed in the glow of sunset. Gaea lingered for a moment before she, too, receded like the winds, leaving Niala all alone.

Stunned, Niala stared out over Najahmara unable to move. She sat until darkness fell and the people slept, until her legs were cramped and her mind was numb. Then, and only then, could she stagger to her feet. With one last glance at the five stones, she made her stumbling way down the path to the valley. Walking through the gardens behind the temple, she prayed no one would be awake, for she could not even begin to speak of what had happened.

Sleep would not come to her that night, no matter how she tried. Lying in a woven hammock hung from a wooden frame, Niala stared into the murky corners of her quarters. The night outside her window was equally as indistinct because the moon was no more than a sliver, waning past its fullness into a black disk. The gloom only added to her distress, for every rustle outside her window caused her to start, as if she expected Ares the Destroyer to appear.

Sweating, Niala threw back the light cover and sat up. The room was silent except for muffled sounds beyond the building, in the gardens that lay outside her window. She listened to the night animals snuffling about and to the predator birds as they swooped on fast wing searching for food. She hoped there would be no sudden squeal of a snared creature, for she did not think she could bear it this night.

Her mind was too filled with the images of Najahmara’s destruction to hear the death of an innocent, even if it was the earth’s way. Sighing, she rose from her bed and went to stand by the window. She felt a gentle breeze coming through and was grateful to have the sweat dried on her face. It brought the fragrant scent of the flowering bushes to fill her room.

When would he bring this savage army that would cut down her people?

“How can I stop him?” she said to the night sky. She spoke it half pleading, half wondering, yet already knowing in her heart there was only one answer.

Restless, Niala climbed through the window frame and slid to the ground. The grass was damp beneath her bare feet and she breathed in the cool air with

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a small sense of relief. As she moved toward the paths leading into the center of the gardens, it seemed all nightlife froze except for the constantly buzzing insects. She swatted at one, then let her energy seep outward, pushing away any that would sting or bite. The whirring of their wings faded away and she was left alone.

Niala went to one of the low benches near the pond and sat in the darkness with a canopy of stars spread across the sky to keep her company. The water was a long, oval mirror for the stars and crescent moon, and looked as if a piece of the heavens had fallen to earth. It seemed as though she could wade into the sky and disappear into that brilliantly studded archway where Ares would never find her. So tempted was she, that she rose to her feet and went to the edge of the water. As her toes grew wet, she shook her head, amused at herself.

Niala turned back toward the temple, gazing at its discordant shape with affection. Over the years, a single room had grown into a sprawling, half-circle building connected by hidden passages, breezeways and narrow corridors. It was not a thing of beauty, but it held her fondest memories and the people she loved most. The building was draped in shadows. Not a single glimmer of candlelight seeped out, not even in the section that held a second story sleeping room for the younger girls. They should be the first to sleep, as hard as they were pushed throughout the day, yet they were often the last to put out their lights. This, Niala understood, for she knew the excitement of being in the early stages of learning, though her trials had begun in a distant land.

The land of Ares the Destroyer.

His visage once again swam before her eyes and with it came the memories of her time with him. She prayed never to see him again, but always knew she would.

“But not at the sacrifice of Najahmara,” she whispered. The tortured screams in her vision filled her ears once more and the bittersweet scent of blood rose from the earth.

Niala shuddered as cold fingers gripped her shoulder. The hand of doom was upon them and there was naught she could do.

“Niala?”

She was shaken from her reverie, not by the hand of doom, but by Seire’s bony fingers. Still trembling, Niala felt for the bench and gratefully sank down.

“Niala, what is wrong?” Seire touched Niala’s face and felt the tears.

Looking up at her, Niala could not help but chuckle, for she should have known Seire would wait for this exact moment to seek her out. Seire’s slight form was nearly indistinct in the darkness, blending with the tall bushes behind her. She did not need a lantern to find her way, for she had grown blind with age. Though she was bent and gnarled and used a staff to walk, her grip was firm.

“You are a sly one,” Niala said as she wiped her face with her skirt and made

## Ruth Souther

room on the bench for Seire to sit. “How did you know I was out here?”

“I heard you talking to yourself. You do far too much of that these days.”

“I have a great deal on my mind.”

“You should learn to pass on certain duties to others, rather than do everything yourself.”

“Ahh, you are right, but I find peace in work. You witness yourself what happens when I ponder too long on things. Besides, there is not a one of us that slacks.”

Seire sighed and leaned a bit on Niala. “It is true and more and more I find I cannot keep up. Soon, another will have to take my place.”

They had talked of this before and each time Niala rejected the thought. As she put her arm around Seire, she noticed again how frail she was, how age was stealing away her health.

“We have already lost one, I cannot bear to lose another.” Unbidden, the gentle face of Basimah came before her. Niala could not believe Basimah had passed on, for she had been so young.

“How long has it been?” Niala murmured. “An entire turning of the seasons, or more?”

“More,” grunted Seire. “And I did not say I would lay down and die. I merely said soon I would be of no use.”

Niala made a rude sound. “You may be blind and crippled, but of no use? Not until your bones are without flesh.”

They both laughed and then fell silent for a moment.

“Niala,” began Seire slowly. “Something is wrong, I feel it. You have been very quiet, lately. Now, I find you out here. Though it is your habit to wander at night, I know it is not our daily life that causes this grief.” She paused before adding, “I, too, have felt something is amiss. We all have.”

“I should have known you would feel it. All of you.” A twinge of guilt leapt up as Niala thought about the little lines of worry on Jahmed’s forehead as they shared their evening meal. The way Inni threw out hints to speak of it. Even Pallin, the youngest of the five, watched her with a concern that Niala ignored.

“I have had a vision...” With a deep breath, Niala told the old priestess of all she saw and when she was done, she felt the panic rising up in her all over again. “I fear he comes for me, Seire.”

“But why? Who is this being and why have I not heard of him before?” Though the old woman spoke forcefully, her body trembled.

“It happened a very long time ago, when I was little more than a child.” Niala swallowed hard and stared across the shining waters of the pond. “I do not like to speak of it.”

“Perhaps now is the time for you to tell, if he threatens our safety.”

“Yes, you are right, but how I loathe to say his name! It is as if I will invoke him if I so much as whisper...Ares...” Niala passed a hand across her face and

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paused. "Ares the Destroyer. The only ones who knew of him are long dead. They were the ones who helped me escape him."

"I have heard the tale of your arrival here. Of course, I notice you leave out your own name now and your role in this valley's discovery."

"It must be so, Seire, for it is too hard to explain how I was there and I am still here."

"They would understand."

"How can they?"

"They would try," Seire said patiently. "You do not give them the opportunity."

"Yes, but who is aware that you are my granddaughter removed how many times? I have lost count. I do not want it known, do you?"

"Uhhh..."

"What?" Turning suddenly, Niala added, "What do you mean, old one? I know that tone."

"People talk and just because we are priestesses does not mean we are above such things. I have told them all about it. There is much speculation, but still..."

"Ahh, so I am indeed subject to discussion amongst the women?"

"More likely, everyone in Najahmara, but they are too polite to ask."

"Well, even if they did, I would not answer."

"And they do not need one, Niala, for it is you that sustains us. You give us strength and hope, you keep us well and in health. Why would anyone question that?"

"Do not be silly, old woman. It is Gaea who does all that... I am no more than her servant."

"Perhaps that is why, because Gaea wants you to be here."

Niala shrugged. "And does Gaea want Ares the Destroyer to find me?"

"She warns you of him, does that sound like she wants him here?"

"Or does she tell me he comes, no matter what I do? The bloodshed I saw was exactly what happened to my family, to my entire tribe. I was taken away and given to him as a sacrifice, Seire."

"Mercy," whispered Seire. "And yet, you live."

"Yes, I live, and I came here for sanctuary. We have allowed no such terror to touch our world. We have not made a place for bloodshed and I have prayed this one would never cross my path again. Lo! I did not believe he would find me, although the fear has always lain in my heart of hearts." Niala stopped suddenly and took a deep breath. "But I should start from the beginning..."

"Yes, yes...you should." Seire was insistent.

"I should have told you before, but I thought..." Niala sighed. "I thought I had truly escaped him, after all this time."

Gently, Seire touched Niala's cheek. "Tell me, then, and do not be afraid."

## *Ruth Sautter*

Whatever happens, it is not your fault.”

“It is a long story...”

“I scarcely sleep anymore and why would I? I have no time to waste.” She poked Niala in the side. “Tell me.”

Niala nodded and squeezed Seire’s fingers. As soon as the first words left her mouth, she was a child again reliving the tale as if it were now.

“My parents had only me and each night they thanked the heavens for their good fortune. They said I was a gift from the goddess.” Niala smiled.

“My mother knew what happened to females, no matter what the ages, for we lived the life of herders. Women...well...women were taken very young and most did not survive to any great age. My mother was determined that would not be my fate.

They claimed I was a male child, kept me covered and sheared my hair in the manner of the other boys. As I got older, they wrapped my head in cloth and, instead of doing work common to the women, I walked along side my father and did as he did. I had the strength of a boy and knowledge of the herds. Though I was very young, I was tall for my age and broader of shoulder than most girls. It was easy for me to fool even the closest of my father’s family.”

The smile faded from Niala’s lips and a sad, faraway expression took its place. “I was an obedient child and did as my parents bid. As I grew, I spent more time with the herds and less time with them. It was my tenth year...” She stopped and cleared her throat. “We were high up in the hills where our goats liked to wander when the first snow hit us... Seire, you have never seen a time when rain becomes hardened into white flakes, when it falls from the sky so thickly you cannot see your hand before your face. It comes down from the heavens in a perfect drape, like feathers, or...or clouds, if they were to touch the earth. Everything becomes quiet, as if you have plugged your ears with your fingers. If the wind is not blowing, even the cold is not bothersome.

Snow can freeze man and animal in their tracks but sometimes...sometimes...it is this drifting, soft blanket of pure white that touches your face like the wings of a bird in flight. You can catch it on your tongue and feel the coldness melt into the freshest water. We would roll in it, play in it...”

Niala paused, staring out at the warm night that held Najahmara. “But this time was not about children throwing snow at each other. It was that kind of beauty falling from the sky, but as we lay looking at it from our blankets, we could hear a strange pounding, snorting sound that made me think of animals when they are frightened. Slowly, around the edges of these odd noises, we could hear shouting and then screams. And crackling, like the tiny fire we had to keep the air dry, although it had gone out while we slept.

All this was in the distance. The darkness was distorted by light from burning tents. It was like a dream when what you hear does not fit in with what you see. My eyes were open and all around me was beauty, but what we heard

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was a nightmare come alive.”

Shivering, Niala rose to her feet and began to pace back and forth along the pathway. She had pushed this tale away for so many years, refused even to think of it and yet, with a few words, it sprang forth with all the horror of the moment.

Seire hesitated and then said, “If you do not want to finish, I will understand.”

“No, no...I will tell you. I must, for I have never spoken of this to anyone here, for there seemed no need. Now...” With a deep breath, she went on. “There was no chance for my tribe to escape. These savages attacked while they slept, attacked those who were harmless, those whose only defense was to run away. But they were not even given the chance to run. As they came from their tents, they were killed. There were bodies everywhere and more blood than I had ever seen.

We should have stayed where we were, but the boys with me were older and filled with such anger that they raced down the hillside with the intent to do their own murder. But, of course, they were cut down before they even had a chance to fight.”

Niala’s breath quivered and she closed her eyes. Tears slid from beneath her lashes.

“I followed the boys down but slipped around the edges to find my parent’s tent. It was already gone. Burnt up. But they were not. They lay in the snow with their blood spread out in an evil blackness I will never forget. They were dead, staring up at me. I knew they would want me to run, to live. Instead I knelt in the snow, weeping and praying that I, too, would be struck down. I prayed it would be quick, merciful and that I would again be with my mother and father.”

“Oh, my sweet child,” Seire whispered. “All these years you have said nothing.”

“No, and it shall not be repeated. This is for your ears, so that you may know. My story has not ended, but has only reached the point of another beginning. Their blood stained my hands, my face, my clothes but I did not care. I wanted to die with them. I could not hear the noise around me any more and I did not know if the strangers still brought terror to the rest of my people. And then it happened. I felt the sting of an arrow pierce my shoulder and I fell over in a swoon on top of my parent’s bodies.

I do not know how long I lay there but it was dawn when my eyes opened again. I staggered to my feet, half-frozen and stood blinking into the rising sun. I did not know the men were still there, that they had stripped our poor tribe of anything worthy and gathered our herds to take as their own. I knew only that the sun rose and I believed myself to be dead. All I could do was stand there and cry out in my anguish, for there at my feet were the poor, frozen bodies of my parents.

Then I saw a few of those who had attacked us and I wanted to kill them. I

## *Ruth Souther*

could scarcely move for the pain and grief, but I tried, Seire. I tried and would have killed them all, if I could have.

They first took me for an apparition. When I rose from a pile of frozen bodies, they were filled with dread. I had come back from the dead, covered in blood and snow, walking toward them with vengeance plainly written on my face. These savages who killed without mercy were afraid of me. I had an arrow sticking from my body yet I screamed at them, cursing them. Instead of striking me down again, they believed I was not human. They took me with them, believing I was a talisman, a charm that would keep them safe from their enemy's weapons.

I would have far rather been slain as I stood than to be taken prisoner by my family's murderers! I swear to you, Seire," Niala's voice was filled with raw pain. "But I went because there was nothing else to do. I was a child and had not the strength, nor the cunning, to free myself. And even though I fought them, it did no good. I could not speak to them and what would I have said? They spoke a tongue I did not know and, in turn, their words meant nothing to me.

I was with them a long, long time. I never spoke to them, not once. But as I listened, I learned some of what they said. This took many, many moons to understand even a few words, as their language was very different from my own. The sounds they made were awkward for me to hear let alone try to make with my mouth. I did everything to stay separate from them. I did not want to know their filthy ways! Even then, I could not afford to let them see me cry, nor show any weakness. They believed me to be a male child and to that end I had to stay true.

They were a cruel lot and I saw much more killing before it was over. I wondered what my people had done to be slaughtered, what we could have had that was so valuable? In time I learned there was nothing. No reason for the killing. It happened because my tribe crossed their path. They stole life for sheer pleasure and punished any survivors with torture until they, too, went to their deaths.

Women and children were raped. Any that were not slaughtered became slaves until they were destroyed or left behind when they became too weak to travel. I was spared for two reasons. I was thought to be a boy and a boy who was not like anyone else. That made me valuable to them. I was a talisman that warded off evil." With a harsh laugh, she continued. "Imagine that, the sole survivor of a murderous rampage and I was to keep them safe! Oh, that I had the power to wipe them all out. I would have, Seire. There are some that do not deserve this life. I do not set myself up to judge, but by their own hands they create the cycle with which they die.

If I could have been the tool that ended that cycle, I would have gladly, even now. Even now," she repeated, and knew this to be true. "I have stood as

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protector of our tribe, of our people and I will continue until I live no more. But now, this moment, I forgo my vow of peace. I swear here, on my mother's blood, if I must destroy others who would destroy us, I will."

"I cannot believe this would happen here, to us," said Seire, gripping her staff between both hands and pressing it into the soft ground. "It is clear to me your vision was of the past, not of the future."

"But it was Najahmara I saw, for we had no buildings then, only poor tents."

"It was not Najahmara," Seire repeated firmly. "What you knew then and what you know now has blurred. It is often so during such moments. And besides, Gaea does not discern between here and there, past and future. To her, it is all the same. She warns you of this demon, that is what this is about."

"I hope you are right," Niala said faintly. "But you have not yet heard all of it."

Seire grew silent for a moment, then answered stolidly, "Then you had best finish your tale, for I do not understand how you would come to know such a creature as this."

Slowly, Niala eased back onto the bench, her gaze faraway, reliving the sheer terror of the moment when she first laid eyes upon Ares the Destroyer.

"He is no simple creature, Seire... he is a god."