

Majai's Fury

Chapter 1

Taifa stared at the towering water fountain, half convinced it sensed her presence. If it did not, something else did. Somewhere eyes watched her. She turned slowly around, but no one was there, not even Juemat who had set the meeting place.

No eyes.

Gray stone walls surrounded the courtyard at the heart of the island, hiding the temple and palace grounds from view. Beyond the walls, flowers bloomed in the king's conservatory, but no birdsong or scent of orchids reached her here. Beyond the walls, people bustled — princes and courtiers, servants and slaves — but their footsteps and voices did not pass through. Beyond the walls, priests of the goddess accomplished their tasks, whatever such tasks might be.

Taifa's gaze flicked back to the waterspout. It pulsed out a rapid tempo, though it might have been her heart that sped up. Best not to think of the goddess Majai, though nearly an impossibility here in the heart of her power. Best not to let the doubts in her own mind come to the surface at a moment like this.

Where was Juemat?

A gurgle caught Taifa's attention as the pendulum in the water clock swung and tipped water into the fifth cylinder.

Late. She'd give him but a trickle more time.

Beyond the wall, perhaps her sister reclined in the glass-enclosed conservatory. Did the prince, Raimi's new haibu, make her smile, or did she already regret becoming one of his women?

Majai's Fury

The royal benefits weren't worth it, in Taifa's opinion. Somehow, though, she'd landed in a more precarious position as haibi to Juemat, one admittedly high in the goddess's esteem, a friend of the prince, even a runner for the king himself.

Where *was* he?

Voices sounded from beyond the pulsing fountain.

Taifa edged around, still unsure whether she should meet Juemat as agreed or simply run. She could tell him he'd been late, and she'd been needed elsewhere, yet he'd asked for a cylinder of her time.

He'd know. He had the ability to see into her soul with those dark, intense eyes of his. She shivered as the water splattered off to the side as though responding to her thoughts.

It wasn't Juemat approaching, but a woman carrying her babe toward the temple.

Taifa caught her breath. No. Anything but this.

A priest in sea-blue robes strode toward the woman. Against her will, Taifa tiptoed closer to see, to hear. Was the woman content to do her duty to Majai?

It seemed not.

The woman was but a girl no older than Taifa's sister, Raimi. Was there any grief great enough for Raimi — or Taifa — to be seen in public in such a state as this? The girl, clad in smudged tunic and breeches, hadn't so much as combed out her tousled black hair. She knelt in submission, her arms trembling as she held up a squirming bundle.

Taifa caught her breath and crept nearer, unable to pull her gaze from the young mother's quivering shoulders and bent form. The priest held his hands over the babe and intoned some words, but Taifa couldn't make them out above the fountain's happy splashes. Her sandals became one with the stones, her body but a statue. Time suspended as the image burned itself into her mind.

The unfolding scene held her in thrall so thoroughly she leapt with fright when a hand clutched her shoulder.

Majai's Fury

"Taifa." Juemat pulled her around, encircling her in his arms.

She tried to see what happened next to the woman and child, but Juemat stood in her way. She pushed against him, twisting in an attempt to free herself.

"And here I thought you'd be happy to see me." He nuzzled her hair but loosened his grip.

The priest carried the babe toward the temple, leaving the young mother prostrate on the cobblestones, keening in grief, the only sound Taifa could hear over the fountain.

Her chest constricted so she could barely breathe. She took a step toward the woman, though there was no consolation that could be offered. This was what the goddess Majai demanded — every woman's firstborn child.

"Soon may you be honored in this manner."

Juemat's voice thudded into Taifa's mind. She glanced up at him, startled, but his gaze was not on her. He watched the woman with eyes alight, then leaned toward the fountain.

Taifa looked back. The woman stumbled to her feet as the priest disappeared into the temple. When Taifa turned to Juemat, a little stream of water played with his outstretched fingers, like the caress of a haibi. She could not suppress a shudder at this evidence of Majai's approval. Even his white tunic and breeches seemed to glow in the afternoon sun, while his black hair shone, tied back from his perfectly chiseled face. Once she had longed for nothing more than to be seen with him, to be known as his haibi. How foolish she had been.

Juemat noticed her gaze upon him and smiled. His fingers brushed against her cheek, and she willed herself not to cringe at the droplets of his touch. He must never know the steps she took to prevent his seed from taking root in her. The demands of the water goddess ruled the lives of her people, but Taifa's grandmaem knew much about herbs. And in one thing at least, the old woman was correct. The secret herbs had prevented Taifa's belly from swelling with child no matter the number of haibu she indulged.

Majai's Fury

She must not be found out.

The fountain rippled as though a breeze diverted the water, but the air remained still.

Taifa steadied her breathing and glanced once more at the woman, now shuffling across the bridge, head bent. She would never be like that girl. Majai would never have her child even if it meant denying herself motherhood. She'd made the decision long before, and it was still a price she was willing to pay.

Juemat's lips found hers and she accepted his caress with effort, attempting to respond to him in a way that would not cause him to suspect her sacrilegious, perhaps even treasonous, thoughts. It was hard to recall the time, not so long ago now, when every touch of his sent a thrill of pleasure through her.

"The prince has a room we can use." His lips grazed the curve of her neck. "Later the king has need of me, but I long to hold you before that time."

She'd known the reason he asked her here, but now, after seeing the sacrifice given, she wanted anything but this. If only she'd been brave enough to cut ties to him before. She could say nothing now, or he'd suspect. That couldn't happen.

Taifa forced herself to smile and search out his lips with her own. "Juemat," she whispered.

His hands tightened against the small of her back and he tugged her to begin walking with him toward the palace. "It's important that your body soon produce a babe, my haibi." He pulled her through the side gate. "The king has spoken of reinstating an old law that would cause a woman's life to be forfeit should she not have a sacrifice to bring. I wouldn't want anything to happen to you."

Taifa's limbs turned to stone. She couldn't help stumbling.

Juemat caught her before she fell. "Not to worry, my love. I told the king it was just a matter of time. You're young, only two and twenty. He need not worry about you yet."

Majai's Fury

"How — why does the king concern himself with me?" Her voice shook.

"Your sister is haibi to the prince. King Ezait asked after her family, and he knew that I have been much in your company." He tugged at her playfully. "I told him if anyone can seed you, it would be me. That I would take it as a personal responsibility to fulfill."

Her worst fears realized. She hadn't counted on this law, hadn't counted on Juemat's suspicions. Hadn't considered the king might take notice. No longer was she playing the game of a young girl. Would she have to stop taking the herbs and allow a babe to root within her womb?

The young mother's grief tore at Taifa. How could she put herself through that?

Maem kept reminding her that a woman only went through it but once. Subsequent babes would be hers to nurture.

Taifa pushed the thought aside. The decision would have to wait. For now she must make sure Juemat suspected nothing.

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No matter how many haibi Juemat had taken over the years, the female mind remained a mystery to him. He cursed himself at his timing. Taifa had already been distraught over the wench who had brought her babe, making her response to the king's edict suspect.

Still, if she swelled with child now, when she had been barren so long, would it not prove the king's suspicion about her family and that meddling grandmaem of hers? If only there were an excuse to search Taifa's cottage. Not that he knew what to look for.

He steered her toward the bower kept at the ready in the palace's outer rooms, concentrating on small talk to put her at ease. Her laugh seemed forced, but he gave her tribute for trying. It wasn't as though she didn't pleasure his body or his eye. The tangerine silks she wore today did little to conceal, clinging as they did to every perfect curve of her small, tight

Majai's Fury

body. Juemat urgently wished the bed were nearer.

"Juemat!" His comrade, Lisairn, strode toward them down the corridor.

"What is it? Can't you see I'm busy?"

"A trickle of time only, Juemat. Word has come from the caverns."

Juemat stiffened, and his arm dropped to his side. He did his best to stare Lisairn down — the man knew better than to mention this in front of anyone. But Lisairn's chin came up, as did his eyebrows.

Juemat opened the door to the bower and nudged Taifa toward it. "Prepare," he whispered. "I will return in mere drops of time."

Taifa clutched at his arm. "What is it?"

He took her face between his hands and kissed her, drawing out the length and depth of the caress until he heard Lisairn shifting in the corridor behind him. "Nothing for you to worry about, my love. I'll be right in."

She searched his face, sparing a glance for Lisairn then entered the room willingly enough.

Juemat closed the door and leaned against it. "What happened at the cavern? Quick, tell me."

His friend grinned. "She'll wait for you, don't worry. It'll be all the better for a bit of teasing."

"Lisairn. Now."

"A skiff is gone. And the boy."

"The one who seemed to watch us?"

"Aye, him."

Juemat cursed. "Find him."

"They're looking. They need you."

"I'm to be here when the scar-face arrives. You know that. The king asked it of me."

Lisairn leaned closer. "The king needs you there more than here. What will the foreigner do, all by himself here in the heart of the city? Nothing. Yet we cannot risk the child. He must be found."

"This order comes from the king?"

Majai's Fury

"Aye."

Juemat sighed, torn between his desire for the desirable woman and his despair that the slave might make good his escape. "Give me but a cylinder, Lisairn. I have something to finish. Get the ship ready if you please."

The man grinned. "I'll tell the king we're on our way."

"You do that."

Lisairn's footsteps faded down the corridor as Juemat stood, head bowed against the door. Now to compose himself, for no mention of the child should come from his lips in Taifa's presence, yet she'd require an explanation for the interruption. He pushed the door open, expecting to see her prepared to greet him, but she sat on the edge of the bed, still clothed, a troubled expression on her face.

She looked up as he entered, but he could see the effort it took for her to welcome him with her smile. It would be easy to dismiss her now, distracted as they both were. She had proved from the beginning she wasn't in the correct frame of mind this day, but Juemat held to his resolve. He needed release.

"What caverns do you speak of?" Taifa's gaze met his.

"Oh, Lisairn told me of the man from Ghairlazzh. Have you not heard the rumor? A scar-face comes south to speak with the king." He watched closely. Had he diverted her thoughts?

Her dark brown eyes widened. "A scar-face? I've never seen one."

"Most of us haven't. They rarely leave their land."

"Then why ...?"

He shrugged, crossing to sit beside her on the bed. "Rumor has it his trade tongue is smooth enough, though he's spoken little on his trek. He's been coming toward the city for several five-days. He's nearing the entrance bridge now."

Taifa's eyebrows drew together. "What has that to do with caverns? I don't recall hearing of any to the east."

Majai's Fury

He hid a grimace. "Apparently there are, for he was found sleeping in them."

"Why is he coming? Imagine, a scar-face."

The diversion was complete. "It doesn't matter." Juemat fingered the clasps of her fitted tunic. "The reason doesn't affect you, I'm sure, unless you are so desperate for a man you seek to seduce a foreigner. Am I not enough for you?"

Taifa laughed and turned fully to him, wrapping her arms around his neck. "You and ten other men are not enough, Juemat. You know I am insatiable."

He nuzzled into her neck. "Let us see what we can do to satisfy you, then. I can't have you running off with just any foreigner who comes our way."

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Taifa entered her family compound, craving a bath. What had she once seen in Juemat? He made her skin crawl. She needed rid of him, but how, after he had made that startling announcement of the king's edict?

Had her sister heard the rumor? Most likely, though it wouldn't affect Raimi since she'd moved into Prince Kiaros's compound. Though Taifa visited when she could, they weren't close, nor had they ever been. Perhaps it was the fault of the five years that separated them in age. No, the only one who understood was Seida, their grandmaem.

The courtyard lay welcoming before Taifa in the late afternoon sun, heat radiating from the cobblestone patio and earthen walls of each woman's cottage. In the center, the waterspout gurgled away in its raised pond. The rear gate thudded as Seida shuffled through from the vegetable gardens at the far end. The old woman had pulled her wispy gray hair, once black and full like Taifa's, into a simple tie that matched her faded pink tunic and breeches.

Taifa started toward her. "Grandmaem!"

A smile creased the old blind face. "There you are, my child. I have

Majai's Fury

been waiting for you. Did you bring wintergreen from the marketplace? My joints ache." Seida poked a stick in front of her as she felt her way toward her own cottage.

Taifa rushed to give aid, though the old woman had lived in this compound her entire life and knew her way about, so long as the children cleared up their toys. Taifa grasped Seida's elbow and the old woman gave a grunt of thanks. Seida leaned to sit on her stoop in the sun, but Taifa tugged at her. "I need to talk to you, Grandmaem."

With a sigh, Seida climbed the two steps, entered her salon, and settled into her favorite seagrass-weave chair.

Taifa shut the door behind them and turned to her grandmaem. "Juemat suspects. I know he does."

Seida turned her sightless face to Taifa. "Suspects? What does he say?"

Taifa stalked across the small room. "He said the king has found an old law. A woman who is found barren can be sacrificed in place of her firstborn."

"I warned you of the man."

"Grandmaem!" Taifa whirled to face her.

"Well, I did. He's too close to the king and to that prince of Raimi's."

"But —"

"But you didn't listen."

"Raimi —"

"I know, child. I know. You knew it was dangerous, but what could you do once he had seen your beauty? You'd best give in and have a babe." Seida stretched gnarled fingers toward Taifa. "And then you can have more. One day you'll wish you had. Little ones bring joy."

Of course she desired to have a child. Her cousin Naidi's youngsters provided laughter and vitality for the compound. But still. To give up her firstborn? She couldn't bring herself to enter that harbor.

"Taifa. You knew it could not last. I long to dangle your children on my knee before I go."

Majai's Fury

Taifa shook her head, knowing the old woman couldn't see. "Not Juemat. I can't let him put a child in me."

Seida laughed. "And why not? Better his goes to sacrifice than someone else's."

Taifa stared at her grandmaem, sitting there all wispy and innocent. "What does Majai need with all those infants? Why does she require this of our people?"

"It isn't for the sake of the babes, my child. It is a test from Majai for the women, proving our devotion."

Taifa lowered her voice. "It's horrible, is what it is. Why can we not sing and dance in her presence instead? Or cut our hair, or ..."

"It is the way of our ancestors, Taifa. I should never have told you of the Lorgish herbs. You've been discreet, and your aunt has never noticed them amongst the shipments for the market stall, but the time has come to set them aside. Can't you see? They will fault me as well as you, should they ever be found."

Nothing must happen to her grandmaem. The decision had been all Taifa's. Hadn't it? "But Juemat ..."

Seida waved a hand. "So find a different haibu. There are many men who would be honored to aid your sacrifice."

Taifa laughed. "Maybe I should find me a foreigner. Juemat says a scar-face is coming."

"A scar-face? I haven't seen one of those in a long while. Since I was not much older than you are now, I daresay."

"You met one? Tell me." Anything to distract the old lady from Juemat and the tangled net Taifa had landed them both within. She'd need to consider well her choices, but later.

"I was beautiful in my day, you know."

Taifa settled onto the stool at her grandmaem's knee. "So I've heard. Folks say I look just like you did."

Seida stroked Taifa's hair, loosening the ribbon that bound it in place. "Aye, they do say that. At any rate, this man was tall and strong and made my

Majai's Fury

heart melt, he looked so good. I thought it would be an easy thing to lure him to my bed. Men couldn't keep their hands off me in those days."

Another way they were alike. "Was he good?"

"He wouldn't do it. And yet we became friends, for he often came to the marketplace."

Taifa twisted to look up at Seida's face. "Wouldn't bed you?"

"No. He turned me away. He said bedding was for marriage and not for sharing with strangers."

"Marriage?"

"The bonding of a man and a woman, he said. Just two, for all their lives."

Taifa turned the concept over in her mind. It would take a foreigner to think up such a thing. Were not men and women meant to share favors with each other for a convenient time only?

"There are few men I've known who'd deserve such loyalty. I suspect Depakh was one of them. That was his name." Seida nodded, staring blankly at the ceiling. "Depakh of Ghairlazzh. They don't hold much with seeing the world, those scar-faced ones. He was considered something of a heretic to his own kind. He couldn't return home. He said they wouldn't have him."

"What had he done?"

Seida shrugged. "He'd confronted their leader over some aspect of their religion. I can't remember what he called him. He's not a king but more a priest. Some strange word."

Taifa considered what would happen if she challenged her leader, her king. Depakh had been brave to do so, knowing all he'd have to give up.

Murmurs from the cottage next door indicated that Naidi's boys were up from their nap.

"It's strange you should mention a Ghairlazzhian, my child. I have dreamt lately of Depakh's return. Do you suppose it is he?"

"I do not know whether this man is young or old, Grandmaem. Do you often dream true?"

Seida's distorted fingers tangled in Taifa's hair. "You must meet him,

Majai's Fury

must bring him here."

Taifa gently disengaged the old woman's hands. "It is not likely to be him, is it? Wasn't it very long ago?"

"Not so long as all that. I need to ask him questions. There are things I need to know."

"Questions of what?"

"His god. His religion."

"But he was a heretic?"

The old woman laughed. "Some thought so, to be sure, but a true believer still."

Baekol's young voice yelled, "But I *want* to! Maem, let me."

"Poor Naidi." Seida shook her head. "That boy is a handful for her. Such a long time before he is twelve and goes to his daed."

"Indeed it is. I know she hopes to have daughters before then."

"The firstborn was a girl."

Taifa jerked from Seida's hand and clambered to her feet. "We must never speak of it. It is done." Naidi had been young, no older than Raimi, when she had returned from a visit to the temple empty-handed, empty-hearted. Her cousin's grief had caused Taifa to throw herself into her grandmaem's arms late in the night, weeping. She'd been determined to avoid Naidi's fate ever since.

"I shouldn't have mentioned it. Just remembering the Ghairlazhian brought it to mind. He said that their god does not demand their firstborns."

"I could serve a god like that," Taifa whispered.

From the courtyard young Vonduil began to cry and Baekol yelled louder to be heard above his little brother.

"I must go." Taifa patted her bag in search of the wintergreen.

"Think on what I said."

Taifa bent to kiss the old woman and came away with salty lips. She wiped tears gently from the leathery cheek and pressed herbs into gnarled hands. "I will, Grandmaem. I promise."