

This is a myth, based on historic fact. Though it is known throughout Aenya, it is most popular in the coastal cities of Hedonia, Thalassar and Thetis. It is one of Emma's most cherished stories.

The Ballad of Titian and Midiana

By

Nick Alimonos

Let me tell you how I killed her—how I killed the only woman I ever loved. I am a wretched thing, truly, and have little else to offer but this story. Hear me out, if you are wanting for a tragedy, but I give you fair warning: this is no tale for children or the weak of heart, but a thing to curdle the blood, to raise the small hairs of the body.

To know my story, you must know of how I came to Aea. You have heard tales, no doubt, of that fabled isle where no one knows hunger, where the women are as beautiful and as willing as the nymphs. Aea does not appear on any map, and no two sailors will agree on where to find it, but it is no myth.

In the dawn of manhood, I found myself a recluse, wandering between the lands. Having never known family or a home, the world was joyless and bitter, and I unprepared for it, for the way men battled starvation. The gods are angry, people say, so these are dark times. And so life for me was a waiting for death.

War gave me hope for better days. Nibia marshaled its forces against the Dark Hemisphere. There was hope of crushing the bogrens so that men might venture forth without fear to farm what had been despoiled. Bold men and women came from throughout all Ænya, vagabonds such as I, lending their swords to the cause. In this I found purpose, and was determined to it, to win the war alone if need be.

We paraded through the streets, reveling before the first blow was struck. Fate smiled on me, or so I thought, and a new age of prosperity seemed within reach.

We pushed onto that shore of eternal twilight, fighting along the border. The first cycles were promising, merciless. We trampled over bodies, the dead stretching to the horizon,

and many of the lost lands were reclaimed. The Nibian commander, his heart bolstered by victory, longed to push deeper into that sunless land, to make it so that no bogren could challenge mankind again. But soldiers who had not blinked before uncounted hordes fled upon crossing into that accursed wasteland. Our commander was accused of hubris; they said such vanity was an affront to the gods. Fearing mutiny, we were led back to the western hemisphere. Everyone was in good spirits but I, who longed to spill more of the blood of those mongrels.

After two cycles marching across cold dead rock, the sun began to show on our faces. We boarded a ship, which seemed safest passage to Nibia as bogrens have deathly fear of water, but our eyes never met that familiar shore. The fleet met with a storm, churning, black, unholy as Hades. Debris ripped the hull to pieces and all but two joined Sargonius, God of the Sea, in the depths. I was the one. The other was a soldier and a friend of mine. His name was Valis.

We clutched at the splintered hull until our fingertips were raw and swollen, our throats parched, our shoulders simmering under the intense gaze of the sun. Adrift in misery, we longed to have died honorably on the battlefield. But we shuddered at the thought of our bodies being desecrated, used by bogrens in some perverse, ungodly ritual.

Sargonius took pity on us, or so I believed. I woke with a hard stretch of earth beneath my cheek, and in the bright blaze of morning the sand was radiant and golden and blessedly coarse against my fingertips. Within a few paces, Valis stood shakily, and I was overjoyed to see him. For a moment, I hoped we'd died on a good day and journeyed to Alashiya. But as strength returned to my limbs, I realized that I was not gone to the Taker, but trapped in the same emaciated body. With great effort, I pushed myself from the tide coursing through the fringes of my beard, my body heavy as if bound in bronze. Wasted with hunger, my

ribs could easily be counted beneath the skin. I squinted through salt lined eyelids toward brilliant clover-green hills, to icy peaks touching the sky. Was I in paradise? Ages adrift in briny waters, any land would have been.

That night, we camped on the beach, resting against a reef which cut against the tide like the keel of a ship. When the light of morning pried open our eyes, we foraged for clams and seaweed, and after regaining some strength, I studied the zigzag rim of mountains to determine what kingdom we'd been tossed upon.

We set out for civilization on the second day, falling speechless before the unfolding coastline. The cliffs lifted from the Sea like wild, white brush strokes, and the Sea was tranquil as a pond. We could not tell where waves met sky, but for a silver, translucent disc—the moon—mirrored in the ripples of the waters.

We continued along the beach, seeking a path through the rocks, till coming upon sections of colonnades jutting from the rock as if long ago abandoned. Lying across the water, a hundred paces from shore, was a half-submerged statue—a robed woman—whose glaring eye could have eclipsed the sails of our ship. It was there we first glimpsed signs of life, clinging to the mountainside and all about the arms of a harbor, atop islets rising in loops from the waves: houses, gleaming whitely in the sun, with domes and doors and shutters awash in blue.

A half day trek through dense foliage and we came to a clearing of huts made of mud and straw. The islanders went about without clothing of any kind, oblivious to shame or modesty. They were adorned only in trinkets of bone, lapis lazuli or gold, and with patterns of tattooing or branding. With our clothing in tatters, we'd feared the natives might take us for vagabonds, but seeing how it did not matter, we discarded what shreds still clung to our bodies and went about as the natives.

Like no other people I'd known, the islanders devoted themselves to leisure, to singing and dancing and to spinning pottery into every shape of the imagination. They moved with such gaiety, you might think their feet never touched the earth. At last I had found . . . a radiant people. For them, there was no age of darkness. Here was no hint of misery. In that moment, I began to feel, in that most simple state of being, the weight of existence lift from my shoulders.

Though we could not imagine such people harming us, we were too accustomed to suspicion to walk out into the open. And though practicing their custom of nakedness, we resembled outcasts in that we needed grooming.

On the third day, Valis stole a knife of volcanic glass from a hunter, resisting the urge to cut more than a morsel from the spit where a boar had been roasting. I gazed longingly at my friend as he ate, fearing how closely I must resemble him. The greasy sliver of meat fell with a thump into my stomach and the succeeding sensation of hollowness only increased my hunger. At last we resolved to cut our beards, and when we sufficiently resembled the islanders, set out for the blue and white domiciles.

The islanders strolled past us, our emergence met with indifference, for we were no more haggard than the fisherman with his carts of tangled netting. The youth and the poor went about as freely as the primitives in the woods, but the highborn women of childbearing age went to market in pleated robes, as the men labored in kilts and sandals. Despite the urge to learn more about this strange land, we held our tongues.

With the memory of boar still on our palettes, hunger continued to gnaw at us, but Valis and I were without anything to barter. We could not hope even to kill for food, as our weapons were lost to the depths.

Coming upon the city center, we were taken aback by what such a simple people had made. Save for Hedonia with its towering domes and pediments, we'd never witnessed such architecture. Three temples stood, mirroring one another, forming a square. Joy and wonderment and hope mixed in our throats, believing that, as in our own places of worship, the temples must serve as houses of charity.

We made our way to the east temple, eager to hide from the sun amid long columns of shadow. Strange gods of stone frolicked along the pediment, but we did not hesitate to pass under the threshold where the air was cool and crisp.

What came to greet us loosed our hearts like racing horses. The clerics of the temple were women, beautiful beyond measure, formed from the stuff of men's fantasies. They were in states of undress, in hanging silk and peels of gold, in peacock feathers worn in ways that excited our curiosity. Their beauty overcame even the bray of my stomach, reminding me of another, long forgotten hunger. Valis and I were welcomed with butterfly eyelashes, with gestures of hand and hip. What the priestesses discovered must have been pleasing to them and I suppose that even in our haggard state Valis and I were handsome, for one of the older women spoke and we were led into a cavernous space.

We lifted sun beaten eyes to the welcoming lips of a nude goddess. Between her ankles, in a mosaic of splendorous hues, was a clear pool. Without a word, they proceeded to strip off their loose garments, stealing imagination from my mind, and like children we were led to bathe. Fingers soft and white as pearl brushed against me. Hands from many bodies probed my war ravaged frame like serpents seeking to feed. With every caress—a hard day's marching, a night shivering in hunger, a friend wailing in blood—one by one the memories left me like dead leaves in the gale.

We learned that this was the Temple of Irene, Goddess of Love and Peace. Of the other two goddesses, we did not bother ask. We were mesmerized by beauty. And my friend and I were given everything a man might crave, food and clothing, and a warm body to spill our seed.

The nightly orgies became all, and our hearts were enslaved. The women explored each perverse action with abandon, indulgences of which I am too shamed to describe. How many succumbed to me, or I, rather, to their lustful appetites, I dare not count. Every eye and lip, bosom and hip and buttocks, became indistinct in the sweat, in the revelry—their names unspoken, unremembered.

This was my poison, as deadly as any bogren's dagger. The moons came and went and came again, and I no longer waited for night with zeal but dreariness. As for my companion, he never tired of his new existence, continuing into each night as if his lust could only grow out of depravity.

Though my body was restored, a great gaping emptiness was left in me, as if I'd been torn open by a mortar. Despising the wretch I had become, I longed to hold a sword again, to hear the dying of my enemy. Driven mad by the sensation, I abandoned my sanctuary to explore the others, wondering if they, too, functioned as consecrated whorehouses. The central temple was the grandest, a shrine to Zoë, goddess of Life, Wisdom and Balance. Only women served the goddess, their beauty paling before what I had known, but unlike those whores who knew to satisfy only the flesh, the servants of Zoë were wise in philosophy and astronomy. By then, I could understand a little of the Aean language, and with the aid of a Zoë priestess, I learned to speak fluently.

The third temple honored Maki, of War and Virtue. This is where I found my true



self . . . and my greatest cause for grief.



Her name was Midiana. Hers is the face burned under my eyes, the image that shines alone in the darkness.

The goddess in her battle helmet, with her sword and shield of serpents, possessed a hard, somber beauty that made me feel intimidated. At Maki's heel, a priestess was kneeling with bird seed as snow-white peacocks, camouflaged against the stone, nipped at her palms. She was half in silhouette, the shadows playing across the nape of her neck where the torchlight touched her. Her hair was black as pitch against the gleaming white of her chiton, every strand threaded into braids as thick as ropes. When she noticed me, it was like looking into the sun—there was such beauty to be found in those ample lips and dark amber eyes—so much like a bird's eyes—I feared to go blind dare I stare too long.

The priestess was in shock, scattering seed everywhere as the great white birds scampered after it. To my inquiries, she responded with measured and quavering lips, as her forearm hid the sight of me. I'd feared such a reaction cycles ago, upon first engaging the islanders, but was unprepared for it now that I had come to know, in more ways than one, the locals of Aea. She was quick to make it known that nakedness was forbidden in the temple, and I felt suddenly ashamed, for I'd grown accustomed to not wearing clothes. She went on to tell me that no male was to step foot over the goddess' threshold, that even the white birds sacred to

Maki were female. Confounded by the extreme difference of customs, I could do nothing but apologize and take my leave.

As morning crept under my eyes, I realized sleep had not taken me the whole of the night. And I knew, like the bee born knowing of the flower, the hollowness I'd long suffered was for *her*—that nothing could fill the gaping in me but her presense.

Mystified, I returned to the east temple, to find comfort in the company of my old companion. But by that time, he was no more the proud warrior who'd slaughtered bogrens by my side. He had grown, in fact, quite pale, and his belly sagged about the waist, and like a fattened hog he lolled about in nothing but a crown of laurel leaves. I found him on the steps, like a king retired from conquest, laughing like a fool at some base amusement. I pitied what he'd become, but had not the strength to tell him. Upon seeing me, his face brightened, and I told him of the beautiful priestess girl and my pining for her. As a remedy, he invited me to a frolic with the devotees of Irene. My heart did not rise to the idea, but I agreed to join him.

The air was heavy and wet with jasmine and rosewater, and the music of the lyre echoed from the chambers of the sacred pools where stone gods gazed with coy smiles and mock shame. The women in the dim firelight were young and shapely and eager to please, but to the abasement of my pride, I was powerless to engage in the act. I had cycles in which to spill my seed, but again I felt, more than ever, that sense of repulsion.

I abandoned the temple, restless and alone beneath the great moon. The bright turquoise disc seen by kingdoms near and far reminded me of my wandering days, and the vast spread of constellations looked distantly on me in my isolation.

Dressed in a borrowed chiton, I found her in an orchard behind the Temple of Maki, with a rake of sorts, beating olives into a basket. But she did not know me. Was I forgotten so

quickly? How awful that seemed when I'd studied her every line for hours, grating thin my brain with the thought of her!

With greatest care to not mangle her language, I offered her my name. It sounded oddly from her lips, my name echoing in her exotic, dulcet inflection like a butterfly painted in vibrant colors I'd never seen. As politeness was custom, she introduced herself also; Midiana, she told me she was called, but it was more than a name to me; it was a magic word, a secret spell of power. Tradition forbade her from speaking further, she explained, but after decades of peace and prosperity the law had become lax. Nevertheless, she made it known that I was never to touch her—that to graze a single of her hairs was sacrilege. Foolhardy as a man is in his youth, I did not heed the little wisdom that was in me, but persisted.

Worlds divided us . . . I was like a bird who loves a fish, and the sense of awkwardness was like a fist in my gut. Did she look away from me with disgust for my sex, or fear for her god? Were her words, tipped with ice, out of indifference, or something more sinister?

Keeping at arm's length, I raised an empty basket and a rake. We worked alongside one another in silence but for the subtle swish and thump of dropping olives. My forearms became sore and my brow sweaty as the day wore on and the sun grew hotter and higher. She, all the while, moved lightly as a moth, her bare feet turning in a kind of dance to each tree.

With five bushels full and only the bright green of unripe fruit left on the branches, I chanced to ask of the island and of her religion, and of things already known to me so that I might listen to the song of her voice. Like a cleric eager to convert one to their faith, her tongue came unknotted, and she began to explain many things.

Maki delivers punishment to those who blaspheme her or her sisters, Zoë and Irene. The goddess also protects the island from foreigners. Ships wandering close to Aea are split apart by storms. I am ashamed to admit that, even as she told me this, it did not occur to me to think upon my own lost crew. Love for my comrades paled to nothing before her beauty. Both sexes worship idols of Maki, but only a woman can be called to divine the will of the gods. As in every aspect of Aean culture, the female is dominant. Even in war, women go into battle. A female follower of Maki knows a man only in marriage, but a priestess can never be touched by the male sex.

After a little while—or was it many hours?—no more questions could bridge the distance between us; and her eyes—in which I'd found sanctuary from the cold hard surfaces of existence—drifted away from me. I became an apparition beside her, of no more consequence than the moonlight in her hair. Her indifference, and my powerlessness, gnawed at my innards until I could suffer it no longer, and with little ceremony I crept off into the night.

For some days I continued to lend her my hands. When cloistered in the temple, I awaited her from afar. Once, she shooed me away, so that other priestesses not discover me. At any moment, she could have had me banished, and it gave me hope when she did not.

With the cycle of the moons, I learned the pattern of her outings, for the temple priestesses, even those of Irene, functioned in an orderly manner. When Midiana remained indoors to pray, I found comfort in solitude, in roaming the hills and the dry brush wilderness about the outskirts of the city.

One day she was in the courtyard with a sword. Her movements were graceful, hypnotic, but of little use in battle. I knew the priestesses of Maki were warriors, but peace had dulled their skills. Their training was now ritual, more art than war. She took great care

presenting the sword to me, and I resisted the urge to brush a fingertip against her. The hilt was exceedingly ornate, looping patterns etched in gold and jade, like the bands about her forearms. Her face watched me from the mirror surface of the blade. I showed her how to use it, how to kill with it, swinging the weapon with such force that I feared to snap it in twain. Each thrust was to a vital part of the body: the underbelly, the knees, the part of the neck that separates the head . . .

Midiana was fascinated, and it was not long before the thread of her questions turned to me and my origins. She confessed in never knowing battle, and when I related tales of the Nibian War, she quivered with horror, finding the whole bloody ordeal too awful to listen to. At birth, a priestess is chosen to be raised in one of the three temples, but Midiana was not, nor could ever be, a warrior.

We practiced swordplay until our shadows stretched across the courtyard, and I dared to ask if it was not sacrilege to change her fate, to perhaps become a priestess of Zoë, but she withdrew from me like a frightened hare. I did not see her after that for two days, and cursed my tongue for separating me from my love.

When my eyes touched sight of her again, she drifted through the temple's colonnades burdened and insignificant between the massive stone columns weighing upon her. And then she chanced to lift her gaze to see me and was weightless again. Love radiated as the sun upon the world, and as her eyes lingered on mine, more was spoken between us than any words can convey. We were separated by ten paces, mouthing words of affection, and then she was called away.

When the sun was deep in the moon and all were in dreams, we carried on in hushed, frightful voices. She was more beautiful than any goddess could ever be, with hair a

deep violet in the moonlight, crowned by the pinks and violets of the bougainvillea climbing the pillars of the gazebo where we sat. With tears that glistened like diamonds, she lamented her fate—how she could not abandon the priesthood to become my wife. I was taken aback to hear it, having doubted the depth of her love for me. At once, I grieved for us, and confessed all that was in me, and in hearing it she showed no apprehension, but soaked up my words as if she could not survive otherwise. I vowed to return and to sit by her, till my limbs no longer carry me, if only to adore her with eyes and ears. With that, she tore at her robes as if burning in them, letting the once noble cloth in tatters, and embraced me. I did what was in my nature, touching wherever her fingers led me, and no part of her remained sacred.

We found warmth in the cool twilight air. With the sun behind Infinity, we were as united silhouettes, but we dared not be discovered and hid like shamefaced children in a copse of basil. That was time enough for me to regain my reasoning, and like removing an arrow from my side, I suggested we abstain from doing what we had been about to, my fear for her great. At this she flew into a rage, pulling at her braids, clawing at her skin, and I was astounded to hear her cursing Maki with the foulest of obscenities, vowing to offer up her maidenhood should it mean her death. I shuddered at the oath, but she persisted, and whatever power I had to resist her wasted away, and hand-in-hand we ventured into the temple, our hearts thrumming in our chests. “It’s the only place,” she murmured, “where we will not be seen.” I asked about the other priestesses, but she assured me that they were deep in the slumber of undiluted wine and could not be awakened. “No one will know,” she added, and I nodded, captivated by her will, tailing her into the Shrine of Maki.

Across a floor of semiprecious stones, before the eyes of that wrathful goddess, in that sacred chamber where no male was to set foot, I seized her body and she mine. Nude and

entwined, we gave shape to our love, and worshipped each other in words and actions. And though the walls echoed with her elation, we continued untamed, freely exploring every facet that made us man or woman, relishing in our bonded flesh all the more in that we defiled the sanctity of the temple.

What possessed us so? What devils of lust turned us to madness? Was it mere love? I cannot say. When the deed was done, we lay wet and breathy in each other's arms. I felt the victor of a great battle, of a great war, but the moment of ecstasy, of bliss, was fleeting. Spread and broken and overflowing white with seed, Midiana turned to me and whispered, with such shuddering fear I cannot ever hope to forget,

“. . . What have we done . . . ?”

Wisdom erupted from my brain into my consciousness, but it was for naught, for what I witnessed then was a terror beyond comprehension. Sensing some motion in the corners of my eye, my head froze upon the ceiling, fixed upon the scowling face of a living, breathing idol.

“MIDIANA,” the goddess bellowed, and my love shot upward, shaking gruesomely with terror, desperately clutching the remains of her robe to hide her nakedness. Oh, how she turned pale, and fell on her face in penitence! Alas, how she wept for mercy before that somber, pitiless visage. I could hear her murmuring, like a small child, “Forgive . . . forgive . . .” But the idol did not care to listen, delivering justice with its massive, pointing finger. Midiana jolted, like a fish on an invisible hook, and her chiton dropped weakly from her fist. With panic and rage, I demanded to know what was happening to my beloved. But already I could see it. Midiana's figure convulsed like a marionette on the strings of a drunken puppeteer. Her fair flesh was turning hard and pressing up through the skin: scales. As I stood, powerless and

desperate, the goddess' words hammered in my ears: "FOR SUCH SACRILAGE, THERE SHALL BE NO DELIVERANCE FROM ME, AS YOU HAVE SWORN—BUT LIFE IMMORTAL! AS GREAT THE GIFT OF BEAUTY THAT YOU HAVE KNOWN, SO SHALL YOU KNOW, FOR AS LONG AS THE STARS BURN: *UGLINESS*. AND ALL WHO SEE YOU WILL SHUDDER AND BECOME UNMOVING, AND BECOME LIKE STONE."

I reached out, to snatch her from that judgment, my eyes following her transformation as if to steal her beauty in memory. But she stumbled away, hiding her face with a claw that once had been a hand. "Titian!" she wailed, in a voice I accepted, with great reluctance and despair, to be hers. She begged me not look, and in that there was no other way to ease her suffering, I did as she asked and turned away. With what little sanity endured in her, she pleaded that I flee. Despite her new form, my love endured, but I knew that whatever stood before my clenched eyelids was far from human, far from my Midiana . . . so I abandoned her, looking back once to see a shadow across the breast of a lifeless statue, and oh how that writhing shadow made me shiver and look once more away.



Waves crashed against the reef, collapsing over my waist in a cold frothy mist. I'd often visit that rock to listen to the waters and remember my life before Aea. The shore was at thirty paces, and I could still see the depression of our camp in the sand. More than ever, I longed for



peace in my soul, for the freedom from worry granted in death. If only I were as fortunate as my Nibian crewmen to never again know the burden of living!

Without *her*, I was an empty shell, without will, without a soul. But guilt was my tormentor, for I was to blame for Midiana's affliction, I who envied the loveliest ilm in the garden, having ripped her from the roots so her loveliness decay. Maki, that cruelest of gods, found fault in the innocent. I deserved to be cursed . . . *I* who had wallowed in that cesspool of flesh, in that den of whores . . . what had Midiana known of such debauchery?

Alas, there was no sacrifice to make to undo this evil. I cried until my throat gave out, so that my own gods might hear, yet they were deaf to me. As the echo of my anguish carried out to Sea, something glittered in my sight. Embedded in a reef, beaded in the salty spray, was a familiar length of silver. Had the gods taken pity on me after all? Seeing my old sword again conjured bitter joys of bloodshed. Torn between those twin tidal forces of existence, between thoughts of love and thoughts of death, the dreadful solution became clear. Remembering the oath she had made, I vowed by my sword she'd not live a monster.

I walked straightway from the beach, and in that it was midday, the sun beat down on me and I succumbed to delirium. The sword burdened my shoulder with more weight than ever on the battlefield. Had I grown weak since coming to the island? Or was it the heaviness of the deed that pulled on me? Never had I lifted my sword with the intent to murder; how could I turn it against one I adored? But was any part of her still my Midiana? Would she recognize me, or was her mind transformed as well? The more I thought on these things, the more uneasy I became, and nearing the city as I had a hundred times before, I fancied it all a dream. After all, who could have believed it?

Clouds rolled over the city, like those which had brought ruin to the Nibian vessel, casting a gloom over the rooftops and gardens and fountains, the deepest part of the storm looming above the square with its three temples. I had never seen a sunless day on Aea. It was now evident, to all the islanders, that some curse had befallen them.

Above the Temple of Maki, the storm churned angrily like some living thing, like a black whirlpool in the sky. Thousands were gathering there, and the shadows were thick as pitch, revealing each face in sharp relief. To my utter amazement, vines had grown overnight, wrapping every pillar in thorns, weaving across the steps and down from the pediment. Not a gossiping murmur came from the islanders, not a fearful gasp. It was as if they were holding a silent vigil for a procession of the dead. Only their shuffling feet broke over the rumble of the sky, as the people were drawn, trancelike, to the befouled temple. But the islanders kept at a distance as if what had infected the walls might also infect them. My heart throbbed with guilt to see it, a people of such free spirit, of such playfulness and innocence, now muted and pitiable like the condemned marching to execution. I wanted to surrender myself to them. I hungered for their scorn, their jeers, but such emotion was beyond their capacity.

They parted to let me through like docile sheep. Deep into the crowd, I came upon a chain of priestesses, linked wrist-to-wrist before the temple. I recognized their faces and was ashamed, remembering what they had done to me, and I to them. Zoë's acolytes were there also, as were the women from the befouled temple, yet all stood united in the same pure white garment with gold lace about their ankles and hair. Love and Wisdom and Virtue stood together, penitent before the angered god. Beneath that great churning cloud, every face was statuesque, every chin high and proud, no woman less than another. The Priestesses of Aea

were joined in a ring like rigid columns beneath an invisible circular temple, their chanting a low murmur of contrition.

Others looked on with reverence, their eyes glazed with zealotry, but I was far from owing respect to that god of cruelty. I pulled a young girl out of her ritual, demanding to know what was happening. “Maki is angry,” she told me, and a follower of Zoë added, “The balance has been broken.” She looked as frightened and helpless as the rest. I asked if anyone had gone in. “Only one,” a voice replied. It was a woman who had known Valis and me intimately. Her face was solemn and world weary, as a mother with aged children, the perverse rituals I’d known of her seeming unthinkable. “Your friend, Valis . . .” she murmured. “We tried, but nothing could dissuade him. He was adamant to find you.”

“Let me go,” I cried, but they would not let me through the ring, and many more turned to me, saying it was forbidden. Hearing the word *forbidden* loosed something dark within me, and I fell into frenzy, pulling apart their joined hands.

I cut through the web of thorns and crossed into that vast, cold lair. With my sword tight against me, I moved inward, the mosaics on the walls turning monstrous in the flickering light. Rows of fluted marble flanked my sides. Barrel arches beckoned to infinity, like when a mirror reflects upon another. Like a prowling thief I searched the temple, hiding from pillar to pillar. My friend I could not hear, nor Midiana; and I dared not call out for fear of what might answer. In the deadening silence, my breathing was like a windstorm, the crackling and popping of unseen torches like thunder.

The memory of Midiana’s beauty contested with my dreadful imagination, and I recognized the morbid curiosity in me, to look wide eyed upon what she had become. But the deeper I probed in the gloom of the temple, the more the thought terrified me. How grotesque

can a living thing be? Would Maki's words ring true? Would my mental faculties withhold? I was more frightened than in the heart of the Dark Hemisphere, for death is a trifling thing, a peaceful repose, but to lose one's sanity is to live a nightmare from which there is no waking.

Answering my thoughts, I crossed upon a long shadow and the silhouette of a man. I knew it to be Valis, but what I discovered struck me with both awe and despair. Valis stood, ashen as the marble at his feet, his every follicle a thorn. Did the shadows deceive me? No. I looked into his face, into pupils like inkblots fixed in the chalk white orbs of his eyes. Whether living or dead, I could not say, for there was no trace of life within him but that he remained standing. I went to rouse him only to snap my hand away, for what I had touched was nothing like flesh. All the warmth in that virile body had gone. Like weathered flagstone, I expected his arm to break off should I touch it again. And then the inkblots moved, and I leapt, catching a scream in my throat.

My love for him bolstered my courage, and placing my ear to his marble cold lips, I bid he speak to me.

"I came to look for you." It was so subtle a sound that I doubted it, whether coming from him or my own skull. But then he was pleading, begging, as if he knew I would not obey. "Don't look at her, Titian! Don't look at her! Turn back!"

His final breath escaped with those words, and I grieved for my friend, for his senseless death on my behalf. There was no denying that he was victim to Maki's curse, that upon seeing my priestess, Valis was changed into something less like flesh and more like stone. Stricken by his fate, my heart gave way to such terror, I feared the blood might burst out of me completely. One thought kept me from breaking my vow and fleeing, and I spoke it aloud, so the walls echo with her name. Love remained, greater than any fear.

Turning in search of her, something crept beneath my feet with such a noise that the hairs on my neck pricked in warning, and then a human shape, familiar yet strange, silhouetted the light from the adjoining hall. My sweat turned to ice and my spine became limp as straw. I could do nothing but run, gripped by such dread I worked my feet awkwardly across the floor like a crippled soldier.

Where was I headed? Back to the comfort of daylight? But already that voice, that horrid voice was calling me. I prayed for deafness, imagining what such a creature might be to make that sound, and I accepted Valis' wisdom, never turning to face what chased me.

The temple became a maze of shadows and flames and fluted colonnades. Gasping at air like a dying fish, I found shelter by the one torch still burning, before that scowling idol of Maki. At my feet, a splendor of multicolored stones fanned out, and in my mind's eye our naked and entwined bodies groped like ghosts across the mosaic.

I had hoped the monster to avoid the light, to hide its ugliness in darkness, but her shape was already forming about my eyes, and I was amazed by its size, for surely it stood above me! And that awful voice came again, and I could no longer deny it . . . the sounds it had been making—over and over amidst those tortured syllables—was my name.

“Do you not still love me, Titian? Why do you flee from me?”

“Midiana!” I cried weakly, ashamed that I could not bear to lift my eyes, my sword slipping from my numb and quaking fingers.

Her answer was acid in my ears, “I am no longer she, but the guardian of the Shrine of Maki.”

Redemption was beyond me, yet I fell to my knees, my hands as blindfolds, begging that she show some sign of her former self, some understanding of me and my remorse.

“Look at me!” she wailed, her shadow suggesting a darting, slithering motion, “See what you've made me!”

Embattled by love and pity and shame and remorse, I wept. I wept and like a madman beat at my naked breast.

It—or she—moved within my circle of light. I could sense her presense, creeping like maggots, her tortured voice riddling me with gooseflesh, “Titian! Oh, Titian . . .! Truly, you must love me, for even as I am, you return to me. Now we shall be together forever.”

Only then did I come to understand, with a sickness growing in my heart, the full extent of Maki's curse—for our love had not been abolished, but perverted, twisted into a thing unrecognizable and repulsive. Cast into madness, I screamed, throwing down the torch stand. But the fire still flickered from the mosaic, and by chance she hooked my eye, and I saw where the light crept over the rough surface of a reptilian thing with cream-colored fish eyes in what vaguely suggested a woman's—Midiana's—face. I turned as if blinded by a wasp's stinger, but I could still feel her caress drawing lines of blood across my shoulders. If not for the sword at my ankle reminding me of my vow, I might have stood there forever, blinded and quivering in her embrace.

To be done mercifully, I knew, was to be done quickly, but even then, even then, I loved her. And in that moment's pity, something writhed about the edges of my sword, a tangle of braided serpents, their fangs pressing like needles into my lips, nose, working their way through my clenched eyelids. Her claws were at my throat now and the wiry serpents continued to nip and draw blood. I was paralyzed, the sword unwieldy in her embrace. But then I remembered the torch stand, and righting it with my heel, the monster recognized its hideousness upon the surface of my steel and recoiled. I struck at her. The blade lodged into

hard flesh and cold blood oozed against my bosom. Her anguished screams would have torn the sanity from any man, yet I blotted all but my aim, and realizing I had yet to cut through bone, struck again and freed my love.

As the monster fell away, something rolled over my feet, and I dared to look, seeing braids where there had been serpents. With Midiana's head removed, the goddess' curse was lifted. She looked peaceful, asleep in death. I cradled her head, washing her brow in tears, and with every kiss upon those rose red lips, my heart throbbed as if to burst.

Too brief a time was given me. Her face was turning pale and cold, her beauty restored only to wilt. Like a knife in the sternum, I realized what I had paid for my obsession. Of this life which I so detested, I loved but two things, Valis and Midiana . . .

The world was now empty and I wished for nothing but to bring my sword to my throat, to join my friend and my lover. But I had more evil to do. Lifting my sword from the multicolored tile, I made for that scowling idol. Sparks rained down from the goddess' marble heel as I attacked it, over and over, as though the tower of stone could die.

My hatred was spent upon Maki until my arms gave out, but it was their woeful gasps that made me surrender.

“Enough!”

The High Priestess of Zoë, my tutor of the Aean language, was watching me. Every priestess, from every temple, was with her. “You have done enough harm,” she said. “Leave now. Men are forbidden here.”

Something monstrous stirred in me, at the reverence for that evil deity, at the lack of bereavement for their fallen sister. And then many things happened at once. I turned to the idol and they moved against me. When the blood cooled and I came again to my senses, three

women lay at my feet, a crimson color spreading across their pure white garments. One of them had been my lover in the Temple of Irene.

At the sight of the massacre, I awaited their rage, their hatred. I wanted nothing more than to die at their hands. But they did not move against me. Their eyes were full of fear and pity and sorrow, but rage and hatred was not known to them.

“You disrespect this holy place,” the High Priestess said, “you do not accept the Tenets of Maki; and yet, did you not partake in the ceremonies of the flesh?”

I was dumbfounded by the question, and ashamed, and my sword grew heavy at my fingertips.

“You cannot revere one god and blaspheme another. There must be balance between them. In your lands, there is only war and desolation. You came here, envying our prosperity, yet you cannot accept the balance which grants us peace.

“Leave this island now. Leave never to return, never to speak of it to outsiders, for your kind is unworthy of paradise.”

That night, I claimed the bodies of Valis and Midiana, letting their ashes rise to the gods from the pyre I set upon the beach. When dawn broke upon my restless eyes, I commissioned a boat for my departure, and the gods favored me with a strong wind in my sails.





I have seen many battles and watched many die since my time on the island, and the blood and passion of youth have long since cooled.

Someday, the Taker will come for me, and I shall welcome him as a friend, for there is no more compassionate a god. He shall take me to the land where the dead dwell, where she waits for me . . . where Midiana waits . . . and over the Goddess of Virtue, Love will have triumphed.

