

Mina buried her queen beneath a mountain.

The queen had raised that mountain, molded it, shaped it, lifted it up with her immortal hands. And now she lay beneath it.

The mountain would die. Gnawed by the teeth of the wind, savaged by the drops of rain, slowly, over time, century upon century, the magnificent mountain Takhisis had created would crumble into dust, mingle, and become lost among the ashes of its dead creator. The final ignominy. The final, bitter irony.

"They will pay," vowed Mina, watching the sun set beyond the mountain, watching its shadow steal across the valley. "They will pay—all those who had a hand in this, mortal and immortal. I would make them pay, if I weren't so tired. So very tired."

She woke up tired; if one could use the term "waking," for she never truly slept. She passed the night in a restless doze in which she remained conscious of every shift in the wind, every animal grunt or cry, every dimming of the moonlight or flicker of the stars. Sleep lapped at her feet, ripples wetting her toes. Whenever sleep's waves, silent and calm, restful and peaceful, would start to carry her away, she would jerk to wakefulness with a gasp, as though she were drowning, and sleep would recede.

Mina spent the daylight hours guarding the Dark Queen's burial site. She never moved far from that tomb beneath the mountain, though Galdar

nagged at her constantly to leave, if only for a little while.

"Go for a walk among the trees," the minotaur begged her, "or bathe in the lake or climb the rocky cliffs to see the sunrise."

Mina could not leave. She had a terrible fear that some person of Ansalon would find this holy site, and once that happened, the gawkers would come to stare and poke at the body and giggle and smirk. The treasure seekers and despoilers would come to rip off the jewels and lug away the holy artifacts. Takhisis's enemies would come to triumph over her. Her faithful would come, desperate to have their prayers answered, to try to bring her back.

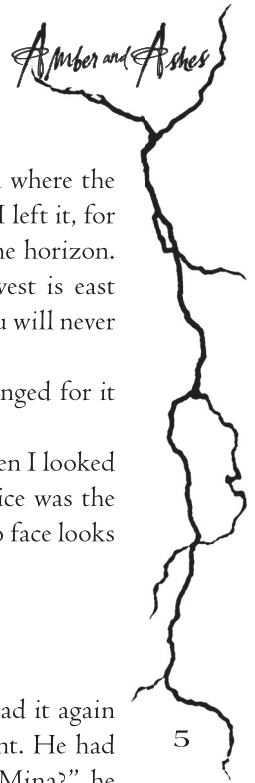
That would be worst of all, Mina decided. Takhisis, a queen who had ruled heaven and the Abyss, forever chained to the whining pleas of those who had done nothing to try to save her when she died except wring their hands and whimper, "What will become of me?"

Day in and day out, Mina paced before the entrance to the tomb beneath the mountain where she had placed the body of the dead queen. She had worked hard, for weeks, for months maybe—she had no sense of time—to hide the fact that there was an entrance, planting trees, bushes, and wild flowers in front of it, training them to grow over it.

Galdar helped her in her task, and so did the gods, though she was not aware of their help and would have scorned it if she'd known of it.

The gods who had judged Takhisis, Queen of Darkness, and found her guilty of breaking the immortal oath they had all sworn at time's beginning, knew as well as Mina what would happen if mortals discovered the location of the Dark Queen's resting place. Trees that were seedlings when Mina planted them grew ten feet tall in a month. Brush and bramble bushes sprang up overnight. A howling wind that never ceased to blow polished the cliff face smooth, so that no trace of the entrance to the tomb remained visible.

Even Mina could no longer find the entrance, at least when she was awake. She could see it always in her dreams. Now there was nothing left for her to do except to guard it from everyone—mortal and immortal. She had become distrustful even of Galdar, for he had been among those responsible for her queen's downfall. She didn't like the way the minotaur was always urging her to leave. She suspected that he was waiting for her to depart and then he would break into the tomb.



"Mina," Galdar swore to her over and over, "I have no idea where the entrance to the tomb is. I could not even find this mountain if I left it, for the sun never rises in the same place twice!" He gestured to the horizon. "The gods themselves conceal it. East is west one day and west is east another. That is why it is safe to leave, Mina. Once you leave, you will never find your way back. You can move on with your life."

She knew the truth of that in her heart. She knew it and longed for it and was terrified of it.

"Takhisis was my life," Mina said to Galdar in answer. "When I looked in a mirror, her face was the face I saw. When I spoke, her voice was the voice I heard. Now she is gone, and when I look in the mirror, no face looks back. When I speak, there is only silence. Who am I, Galdar?"

"You are Mina," he replied.

"And who is Mina?" she asked.

Galdar could only stare at her, helpless.

They had this conversation often, almost every day. They had it again this morning. This time, though, Galdar's answer was different. He had been thinking long about this and when she said, "Who is Mina?" he responded quietly, "Goldmoon knew who you were, Mina. In her eyes you could see yourself. You didn't see Takhisis."

Mina considered this.

Looking back on her life, she saw it divided into three parts. The first was childhood. Those years were nothing but a blur of color, fresh paint that someone had smeared with a soaking wet sponge.

The second was Goldmoon and the Citadel of Light.

Mina had no memory of the shipwreck or of being washed overboard or whatever had happened to her. For her memory—and life—had begun when she opened her eyes to find herself, wet and water-logged, lying in the sand, looking up at a group of people who had gathered around her, people who spoke to her with loving compassion.

They asked her what had happened to her.

She didn't know.

They asked her name.

She didn't know that either.

They would eventually conclude that she had been the survivor of a shipwreck—though no ships had been reported missing. Her parents were

presumed to have been lost at sea. That theory seemed most likely, since no one ever came searching for her.

They said it was not unusual that she remembered nothing of her past, for she had suffered a severe blow to the head, which often accounted for memory loss.

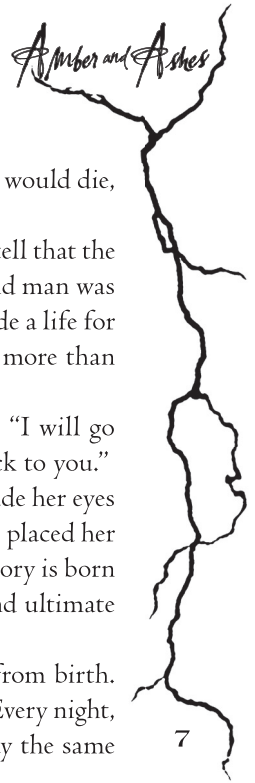
They took her to a place they called the Citadel of Light, a wondrous place of warmth and radiance and serenity. Looking back on this time, Mina could not ever remember gray skies in connection with the Citadel, though she knew there must have been days of wind and storm. For her, the years she spent there, from the age of nine to fourteen, were lit by the sun gleaming on the crystal walls of the Citadel. Lit by the smile of the woman who came to be dear to her as a mother—the founder of the Citadel, Goldmoon.

They told Mina that Goldmoon was a hero, a famous person all over Ansalon. Her name was spoken with love and respect in every part of that continent. Mina didn't care about any of that. She cared only that when Goldmoon spoke to her, she spoke to her with gentle kindness and with love. Although a busy person, Goldmoon was never too busy to answer Mina's questions, and Mina loved to ask questions.

Goldmoon was old when Mina first met her, as old as a mountain, the girl used to think. Goldmoon's hair was white, her face lined with deep sorrow and deeper joy, lines of loss and grief, lines of finding and hope. Her eyes were young as laughter, young as tears and—Galdar was right. Looking back through time, Mina could see herself in Goldmoon's eyes.

She saw a girl growing too fast, awkward and gawky, with long red hair and amber-colored eyes. Every night, Goldmoon would brush the red hair that was thick and luxurious, and answer all the questions Mina had thought up during the day. When her hair was brushed and plaited and she was ready for her bed, Goldmoon would take Mina onto her lap and tell her stories of the lost gods.

Some of the stories were dark, for there were gods who ruled the dark passions that are in every man's heart. There were gods of light in opposition to the gods of dark. Gods who ruled all that was good and noble in mankind. The dark gods struggled endlessly to gain ascendancy over mankind. The gods of light worked ceaselessly to oppose them. The neutral gods held the scales of balance. All mankind stood in the middle, each man



free to choose his or her own destiny, for without freedom, men would die, as the caged bird dies, and the world would cease to be.

Goldmoon enjoyed telling Mina the stories, but Mina could tell that the stories made her adopted mother sad, for the gods were gone and man was left alone to struggle along as best he could. Goldmoon had made a life for herself without the gods, but she missed them and she longed more than anything for them to return.

"When I am grown," Mina would often say to Goldmoon, "I will go out into the world, and I will find the gods and bring them back to you."

"Ah, child," Goldmoon would answer with the smile that made her eyes bright, "your search should carry you no farther than here." She placed her hand on Mina's heart. "For though the gods are gone, their memory is born in each of us: memories of eternal love and endless patience and ultimate forgiveness."

Mina didn't understand. She had no memory of anything from birth. Looking back, she saw nothing except emptiness and darkness. Every night, when she lay alone in the darkness in her room, she would pray the same prayer.

"I know you are out there somewhere. Let me be the one to find you. I will be your faithful servant. I swear it! Let me be the one to bring knowledge of you to the world."

One night, when Mina was fourteen, she made that same prayer, made it as fervently and earnestly as she had on the very first night she had ever prayed it. And, on this night, there came an answer.

A voice spoke to her from the darkness.

"I am here, Mina. If I will tell you how to find me, will you come to me?"

Mina sat up eagerly in bed. "Who are you? What is your name?"

"I am Takhisis, but you will forget that. For you, I have no name. I need no name, for I am alone in the universe, the sole god, the one god."

"I will call you the One God, then," said Mina. Jumping out of bed, she hastily dressed herself, made ready to travel. "Let me go tell Mother where I am going—"

"Mother," Takhisis repeated in scorn and anger. "You have no mother. Your mother is dead."

"I know," said Mina, faltering, "but Goldmoon has become my mother.

She is dearer to me than anyone, and I must tell her that I am leaving, or when she finds that I am gone, she will be worried."

The voice of the goddess changed, no longer angry but sweetly crooning. "You must not tell her or that would ruin the surprise. Our surprise—yours and mine. For the day will come when you will return to tell Goldmoon that you have found the One God, the ruler of the world."

"But why can't I tell her now?" Mina demanded.

"Because you have not yet found me," Takhisis replied sternly. "I am not even certain you are worthy. You must prove yourself. I need a disciple who is courageous and strong, who will not be deterred by unbelievers or swayed by naysayers, who will face pain and torment without flinching. All this you must prove to me. Do you have the courage, Mina?"

Mina trembled, terrified. She didn't think she did have the courage. She wanted to go back to her bed, and then she thought of Goldmoon and how wonderful the surprise would be. She imagined Goldmoon's joy when she saw Mina coming to her, bringing with her a god.

Mina laid her hand over her heart. "I have the courage, One God. I will do this for my adopted mother."

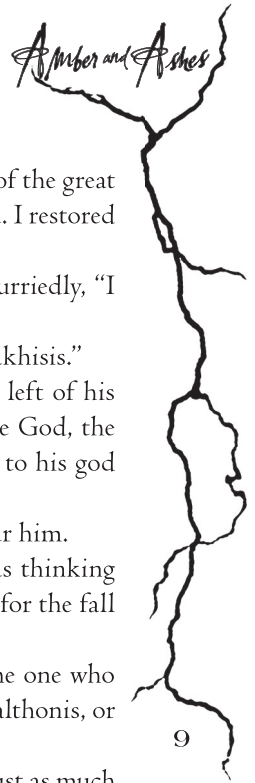
"That is as I would wish it," said Takhisis, and she laughed as though Mina had said something funny.

Thus began the third part of Mina's life, and if the first was a blur and the second was light, the third was shadow. Acting on the One God's command, Mina ran away from the Citadel of Light. She sought out a ship in the harbor and went onboard. The ship had no crew. Mina was the only person aboard, yet the wheel turned, the sails raised and lowered; all tasks were accomplished by unseen hands.

The ship sailed over waves of time and carried her to a place that she seemed to have known forever yet just this moment discovered. In this place, Mina first beheld the face of the Dark Queen, and she was beautiful and awful, and Mina bowed down and worshipped her.

Takhisis gave Mina test after test, challenge after challenge. Mina endured them all. She knew pain akin to the pain of dying, and she did not cry out. She knew pain akin to the pain of birth, and she did not flinch.

Then came the day when Takhisis said to Mina, "I am pleased with you. You are my chosen. Now is the time for you to go back to the world and prepare the people for my return."



"I went back to the world," Mina told Galdar, "on the night of the great storm. I met you that night. I performed my first miracle on you. I restored your arm."

He cast her a meaningful glance, and she flushed and said hurriedly, "I mean—the One God restored your arm."

"Call her by who she was," said Galdar harshly. "Call her Takhisis."

He looked involuntarily at the stump that was all that was left of his sword arm. When he had found out the true name of the One God, the god who had returned his lost arm to him, Galdar had prayed to his god Sargonnas to remove it again.

"I would not be her slave," he muttered, but Mina didn't hear him.

She was thinking about pride, hubris and ambition. She was thinking about the desire for power and who had truly been responsible for the fall of the Dark Queen.

"My fault," she said quietly. "I can admit that now. *I* was the one who destroyed her. Not the gods. Not even that wretched god-elf Valthonis, or whatever he calls himself. I destroyed her. I betrayed her."

"Mina, no!" Galdar returned, shocked. "You were her slave just as much as any of us. She used you, manipulated you—"

Mina raised her amber eyes to meet his. "So you believed. So they all believed. I alone knew the truth. I knew it and so did my Queen. I raised an army of the dead. I fought and killed two mighty dragons. I conquered the elves and brought them under the heel of my boot. I conquered the Solamnics and saw them run from me like whipped dogs. I made the Dark Knights a power to be feared and respected."

"All in the name of Takhisis," said Galdar. The minotaur scratched the fur on his jowls and rubbed his muzzle. He looked uneasy.

"I wanted it to be in *my* name," said Mina. "She knew it. She saw into my heart and that was why she was going to destroy me."

"And that was why you were going to let her," said Galdar.

Mina sighed and bowed her head. She sat on the hard ground, her legs drawn up, her arms wrapped around her knees. She wore the clothes she had worn that fateful day when her Queen had died, the simple garments worn underneath the armor of a Dark Knight—shirt and breeches. They were ragged and worn now, bleached by the sun to a nondescript gray. The only color that was bright upon it was the red blood of the queen who had died in Mina's arms.

Galdar shook his horned head and sat up straight on the boulder he was using for a seat, a boulder he'd rubbed smooth over the past several months.

"All that is over now, Mina. It is time you moved on. There is yet much to do in the world and a new world in which to do it. The Dark Knights are in disarray, unorganized. They need a strong leader to bring them together."

"They would not follow me," said Mina.

Galdar opened his mouth to remonstrate then shut it again.

Mina glanced up at him, saw that he knew the truth as well as she did. The Dark Knights would never again accept her as a commander. They had been wary of her from the beginning—a girl of seventeen, who barely knew one end of a sword from another, who had never seen a battle, much less led men into one.

The miracles she performed had won them over. As she had once told that wretched elf prince, men loved the god they saw in her, not her, and when that god was overthrown and Mina lost her power to perform miracles, the knights went down to disastrous defeat. Not only that, but they believed that she deserted them at the end, left them to face death alone. They would never follow her again, and she could not blame them.

Nor did she want to be a leader of men. She did not want to go to back into the world again. She was too tired. She wanted only to sleep. She leaned back against the bones of the mountain where her queen lay in her eternal slumber and closed her eyes.

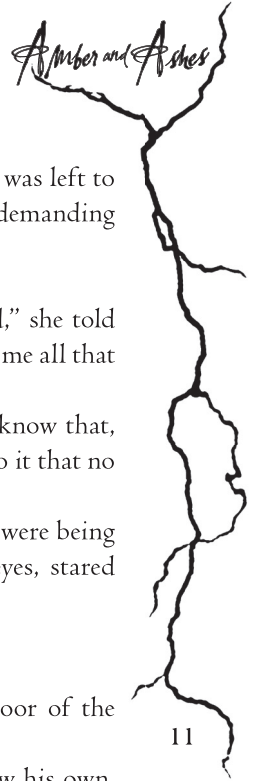
She must have drifted off, for she woke to find Galdar squatting beside her, pleading with her earnestly.

"—must leave this prison, Mina! You've punished yourself enough. You have to forgive yourself, Mina. What happened to Takhisis was her own fault. Not yours. You are not to blame. She was going to kill you! You know that. She was going to take over your body, devour your soul! That elf did you a favor by killing her."

Mina raised her head. Her look stopped him, stopped the words on his lips and rocked the minotaur back on his heels as surely as if she'd struck him.

"I'm sorry, Mina. I didn't mean that. Come with me," Galdar urged.





Mina reached out her hand, patted him on the one arm that was left to him. "Go on, Galdar. I know your god has been hounding you, demanding that you join him in his conquest of Silvanesti."

She smiled wanly at Galdar's sudden discomfiture.

"I've eavesdropped on your prayers to Sargonnas, my friend," she told him. "Go fight for your god. When you come back, you will tell me all that is happening in the world."

"If I leave this accursed valley, I can never come back. You know that, Mina," said Galdar. "The gods will see to that. They will see to it that no one ever—"

His words froze on his tongue. Even as he spoke them, they were being proven untrue. He stared out across the valley, rubbed his eyes, stared again.

"I must be seeing things." He squinted into the sun.

"What now?" Mina asked wearily. She did not look.

"Someone is coming," he reported, "walking across the floor of the valley. But that can't be."

"It can be, Galdar," said Mina, her gaze now going to follow his own. "Someone *is* coming."

A man strode purposefully across the windswept, bare-bones floor of the desert valley. He was tall and moved with commanding grace. Long, dark hair blew back behind him. His body shimmered in the waves of heat that rose up from the surface of the sand-covered rock.

"He is coming for me."