

**An Excerpt from “Azal: A Retelling of Eve”
by Josephine (Dunne) Stewart**

Azal and Afari settled down on the floor to watch and listen to the magic being woven by the priests of the Sun. Azal noticed that there were no priestesses and was thankful that they had not felt it necessary to include women. That was probably their mistake. Women are much more powerful in ritual than men, and to have a woman working with them would have made the ritual more difficult to unravel.

The priests had aligned themselves to the directions and the senior priest nodded to two younger ones to remove a large stone plate in the center of the floor. They turned the wheel that maneuvered the heavy plate to one side, revealing the fire of the volcano below. Azal became very curious. What were they doing? The priests all went into inner vision, signaling that the power was going to be higher than Azal had previously thought. The less action or ceremony that happened in the outer form of a ritual, the more powerful the final results would be. She sat quietly and slipped into vision herself, first touching the scar on her forehead in recognition of the Goddess. The lion appeared quietly by her side, watching and waiting. She looked around the temple with her inner vision. She was surprised to see that it had been reinvigorated and aligned.

The priests were each reaching down to draw up strands of fire from deep within the earth, and connecting them together, like weaving a large cloth. They all merged above the volcanic fire, forming a sphere within which developed a series of helix patterns. They worked tirelessly, pulling and weaving until they seemed to be unable to withstand more. At that point, the senior priest called out for the guardian he had created during their last ritual. A large almost shapeless being stepped out from the wall behind the priest and stood by the flames. The guardian was charged with holding the sphere to protect it from any intrusion. The large creature reached out and took the sphere into its hands, holding it out over the volcanic flame. It stayed there motionless as the priests slowly withdrew from the inner worlds back into the outer world. They quickly broke up the circle and doused the flames, leaving only the volcanic fire still exposed in the center of the hall.

As the last priest left the temple Azal breathed a sigh of relief. When they were sure everyone had gone, they silently crept out to look around them. Azal was intrigued by the sphere and what they might try to do with such energy. She moved as close as she dared without alerting the guardian, trying to feel her way around the sphere, and sensing its use. Nothing. Nobody had spoken during the ritual. No one had indicated what they were going to do. She cursed under her breath, realizing that she would have to go through it all again. Then she stopped suddenly in her tracks. Priests often talked of their work with pride after the ritual. She remembered the back stair and the passage that led to the upper Sun temple, hidden by the wall hanging. She motioned to Afari, looking around for her. She strained to see into the shadows but Afari's black skin and dark eyes had vanished in the darkness. Afari, giggling, emerged out of the shadows, showing how she could appear and disappear.

Azal motioned for them to go up into the upper Sun temple. Afari caught her arm.

"If we are caught dressed like this and no one recognizes us, we could be slain where we stand."
Azal nodded but still they had to go.

"The lion will guide us."

Afari was not aware of the presence of the lion but knew that the guardian Azal had was powerful and would not allow the Matriarch to get into any danger.

They crept up and up until they came to the side chamber of the Sun temple. They could hear the priests talking in their meeting room. They were arguing over the danger of the power that they had worked with. They talked about the golden city and how they could give it an outlet in the outside world. The 'one who is many yet one' would be able to work through the city, absorbing the power of the people, and the priests would control the people. They argued about who should be senior, how they would justify the exodus to the Matriarch, and how many years would it take to train the local people in the land where they would settle. Humanity in the outside world was weak and still primitive. They would be as demigods to the people and the 'one who is many,' the sisters, would give them endless power.

Then they started to talk of the sphere. Azal inched closer so that she would not miss anything. They talked about how the power strands of fire from the Sun within the earth was beyond anything they had previously known. They argued about the different ways of applying that power to alter humans, to light the dark, to kill in large numbers, and to shape the face of the planet. The Senior Priest stood up. He had been silent up to now, but had decided this was the time to pull these silly children together.

"You must understand that the Matriarch will not let us go and will not support our dream of the golden city. She is opposed to the 'one who is many.' She fears that power, thinking it evil." They all sniggered at the Matriarch's superstition.

"It is vital to the future history of this planet that the golden city is built in at least one place. The temples here have become homes for milksops and eunuchs, run by a silly female child who has nothing of real power but her sexual frustration. The city is stagnant and the people degenerate. There is nothing for us here now and nothing for history. I propose that we use the inner fire power to destroy the island and leave to seed anew."

The others fell silent while Azal's face burned with humiliation and hatred. Afari fingered her moon dagger, weighing up how many she could kill before they felled her. Hot tears of rage splashed down her face as she struggled to be silent. The priests looked at one another and nodded.

"We agree, Priest of the Sun. You are right. We will do as you say. Just tell us where and when."

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