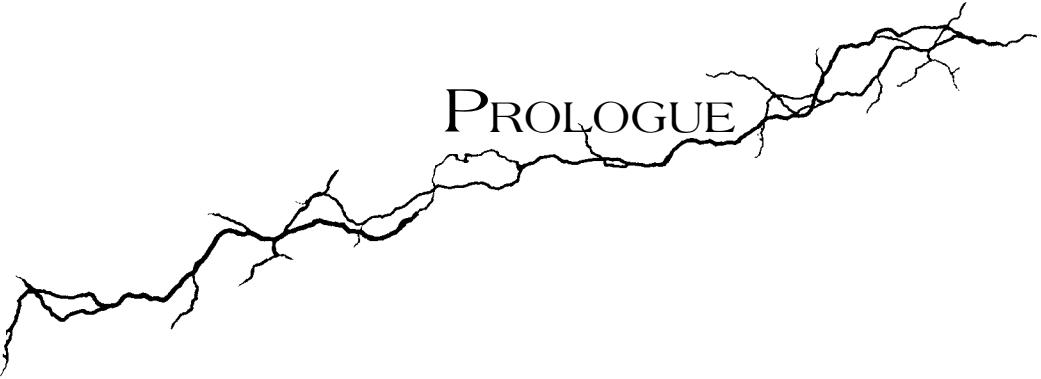


the Dark Disciple

AMBER AND IRON

MARGARET WEIS





PROLOGUE

Timothy Tanner was not a bad man, just a weak one.

He had a wife, Gerta, and a new baby son, who was healthy and cute. He loved both of them dearly and would have given his life for them. He just couldn't manage to stay faithful to them. He felt wretchedly guilty over his "tomcatting" as he called it, and when the new baby arrived he promised himself that he would never so much as look at another woman.

Three months passed, and Timothy kept his promise. He'd actually turned down a couple of his previous lovers, telling them he was a changed man, and it seemed that he was, for he truly adored his son and felt nothing but gratitude and love for his wife.

Then one day Lucy Wheelwright came into his shop.

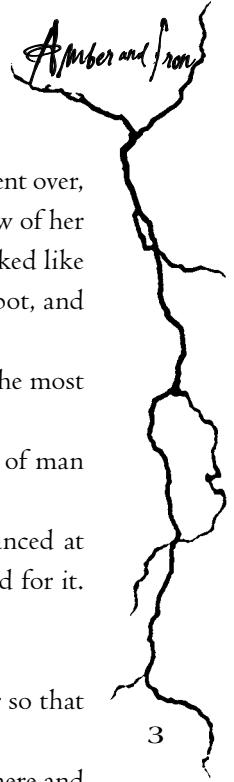
Though he came from a family of tanners, Timothy had been apprenticed to a cobbler and now made his living making leather shoes and boots.

"I want to know if this shoe can be mended," Lucy said.

She placed her foot on a short-legged stool and hiked up her skirt well past her knees to reveal a very shapely leg and more beyond that.

"Well, Master Cobbler?" she said archly.

Timothy wrenched his gaze from her leg to the shoe. It was brand new.



He looked up at her. She smiled at him. Lowering her skirt, she bent over, pretending to lace her shoe, but all the while providing him a view of her full bosom. He noticed an odd mark over her left breast—it looked like a kiss from two lips. He pictured placing his own lips on that spot, and he caught his breath.

Lucy was one of the prettiest girls in Solace and also one of the most unobtainable, though there *were* rumors . . .

She was married, like Timothy. Her husband was a big brute of man and intensely jealous.

She straightened, tugging her chemise back in place, and glanced at the door. “Could you work on the shoe now? I really have a need for it. An aching need . . .”

“Your husband?” Timothy coughed.

“He’s away on a hunting trip. Besides, you could bolt the door so that no one interrupts you in your work.”

Timothy thought of his wife and his child, but they were not here and Lucy was. He rose from his bench and went over to the door, shutting it and locking it. The hour was almost noon; customers would think he’d gone home for his midday meal.

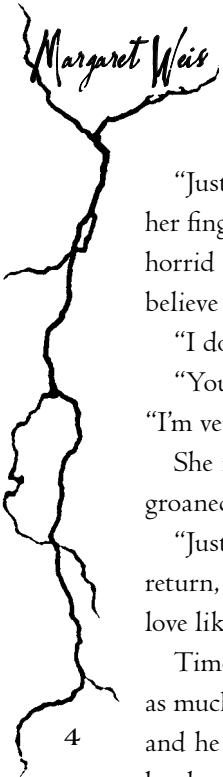
Just to be safe, he led Lucy to the storeroom. Even as they made their way through the shop, she was kissing him, fondling him, undoing his shirt, her hands fumbling at his breeches. He’d never known a woman so ardent, and he was consumed with passion. They tumbled down on a pile of leather skins. She wriggled out of her chemise, and he kissed the place on her breast over the strange birthmark of two lips.

Lucy put her hand over his mouth. “I want you to do something for me, Timothy,” she said, breathing fast.

“Anything!” He pressed his body close to hers.

She held him at bay. “I want you to give yourself to Chemosh.”

“Chemosh?” Timothy laughed. This was a most inopportune moment to be discussing religion! “The god of death? What made you think of that?”



Margaret Weis

“Just a fancy of mine,” said Lucy, winding his hair around and around her finger. “I’m one of his followers. He’s a god of life, not death. Those horrid clerics of Mishakal say such bad things about him. You mustn’t believe them.”

“I don’t know. . . .” Timothy thought this all very odd.

“You want to please me, don’t you?” said Lucy, kissing his ear lobe. “I’m very grateful to men who please me.”

She moved her hands down his body. She was skilled, and Timothy groaned with desire.

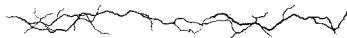
“Just say the words ‘I give myself to Chemosh,’” Lucy whispered. “In return, you’ll have unending life, unending youth, and *me*. We can make love like this every day if you want.”

Timothy wasn’t a bad man, just weak. He had never wanted any woman as much as he wanted Lucy at that moment. He wasn’t all that religious, and he didn’t see the harm in pledging himself to Chemosh if it made her happy.

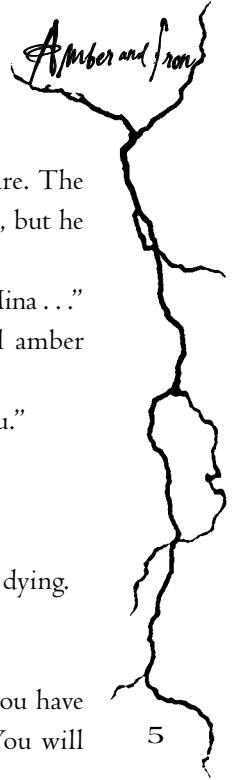
“I give myself to Chemosh . . . and Lucy,” he said teasingly.

Lucy smiled at him and pressed her lips on his left breast over his heart.

Terrible pain shot through Timothy. His heart began to beat wildly and erratically. Pain burned through his arms and down his torso and into his legs. He tried frantically to push Lucy off him, but she had incredible strength and she pinned him down and kept pressing her lips on his chest. His heart lurched. He tried to scream, but he didn’t have the breath. His body shuddered, convulsed, and stiffened as the pain, like the hand of an evil god, took him and twisted him, wrung him, shredded him and carried him off into darkness.



Timothy came out of the darkness. He entered a world that seemed all twilight. He saw objects that looked familiar, but he couldn’t place



them. He knew where he was, but it didn't matter. He didn't care. The woman he'd been with was gone. He tried to think of her name, but he couldn't.

Only one name was in his mind and he whispered that name, "Mina . . ."

He knew her, though he'd never met her. She had beautiful amber eyes.

"Come to me," said Mina. "My lord Chemosh has need of you."

"I will," Timothy promised. "Where do I find you?"

"Follow the road into the sunrise."

"You mean leave my home? No, I can't—"

Pain stabbed Timothy, horrible pain that was like the pain of dying.

"Follow the road into the sunrise," said Mina.

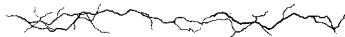
"I will!" he gasped, and the pain eased.

"Bring disciples to me," she told him. "Give others the gift you have been given. You will never die, Timothy. You will never age. You will never know fear. Give others this gift."

An image of his wife came into his mind. Timothy had the vague notion that he didn't want to do this, that he would hurt Gerta terribly if he did this to her. He wouldn't . . .

Pain tore at him, bent and twisted him.

"I will, Mina!" he moaned. "I will!"



Timothy went home to his family. His baby was sleeping in the cradle, taking his afternoon nap. Timothy paid no attention to the child. He didn't recall that it was his child. He cared nothing about it. He saw only his wife and he heard only the voice, Mina's voice, saying, "Bring her. . ."

"My dear!" Gerta greeted him, pleased but surprised. "What are you doing home? It's the middle of the day?"

"I came home to be with you, my love," said Timothy. He put his arms around her and kissed her. "Come to bed, wife."

"Tim!" Gerta giggled and tried, half-heartedly, to push him away. "It's still daylight!"

"What does that matter?" He was kissing her, touching her, and he felt her melt into his arms.

She made a last faint protest. "The baby—"

"He's asleep. Come on." Timothy pulled his wife down onto their bed. "Let me prove that I love you!"

"I know you love me," said Gerta, and she nestled next to him and began to return his kisses.

She started to unlace his tunic, but he clasped his hands over her hands.

"There's one thing you must do to prove that you love me, wife. I have recently become a follower of the god, Chemosh. I want you to share the joy I have found in following the god."

"Why, of course, husband, if that's what you want," said Gerta. "But I know nothing of the gods. What sort of god is this Chemosh?"

"A god of unending life," said Timothy. "Will you pledge yourself to him?"

"I will do anything for you, husband."

He opened his mouth to say something, then stopped. She sensed some inner struggle within him. His face twisted in pain.

"What's the matter?" she asked, alarmed.

"Nothing!" he gasped. "A cramp in my foot. That's all. Say the words: 'I pledge myself to Chemosh.'"

Gerta repeated the words and added, "I love you."

Then Timothy said something very strange as he bent over and pressed his lips on her left breast above her heart.

"Forgive me. . . ."