

*New York Times* Bestselling Author

---

# TERRY GOODKIND



# SOUL OF THE FIRE

# SOUL OF FIRE

by TERRY GOODKIND

## CHAPTER 1

"I WONDER WHAT'S BOTHERING the chickens," Richard said.

Kahlan nuzzled tighter against his shoulder. "Maybe your grandfather is pestering them now, too." When he didn't reply, she tilted her head back to squint up at him in the dim firelight. He was watching the door. "Or maybe they're grouchy because we kept them awake most of the night."

Richard grinned and kissed her forehead. The brief squawking on the other side of the door had ceased. No doubt the village children, still reveling in the wedding celebration, had been chasing the chickens from a favorite roost on the squat wall outside the spirit house. She told him as much.

Faint sounds of distant laughter, conversation, and singing drifted into their quiet sanctuary. The scent of the balsam sticks that were always burned in the spirit-house hearth mingled with the tang of sweat earned in passion, and the spicy-sweet aroma of roasted peppers and onions. Kahlan watched the firelight reflecting in his gray eyes a moment before lying back in his arms to sway gently to the sounds of the drums and the boldas.

Paddles scraped up and down ridges carved on the hollow, bell-shaped boldas produced an eerie, haunting melody that seeped through the solitude of the spirit house on its

way out onto the grasslands, welcoming spirit ancestors to the celebration.

Richard stretched to the side and retrieved a round, flat piece of tava bread from the platter Zedd, his grandfather, had brought them. "It's still warm. Want some?"

"Bored with your new wife so soon, Lord Rahl?"

Richard's contented laugh brought a smile to her lips. "We really are married, aren't we? It wasn't just a dream, was it?"

Kahlan loved his laugh. So many times she had prayed to the good spirits that he would be able to laugh again- that they both would.

"Just a dream come true," she murmured.

She urged him from the tava bread for a long kiss. His breathing quickened as he clutched her in his powerful arms. She slid her hands across the sweat-slick muscles of his broad shoulders to run her fingers through the thick tangle of his hair as she moaned against his mouth.

It had been here in the Mud People's spirit house, on a night that now seemed lifetimes ago, that she had first realized she was hopelessly in love with him, but had to keep her forbidden feelings secret. It was during that visit, after battle, struggle, and sacrifice, that they had been accepted into the community of these remote people. On another visit, it was here in the spirit house, after Richard accomplished the impossible and broke the spell of prohibition, that he had asked her to be his wife. And now they had at last spent their wedding night in the spirit house of the Mud People.

Though it had been for love and love alone, their wedding was also a formal joining of the Midlands and D'Hara. Had they been wedded in any of the great cities of the Midlands, the event undoubtedly would have been a pageant of unparalleled splendor. Kahlan was experienced in pageantry. These guileless people understood their sincerity and simple reasons for wanting to be married. She preferred the joyous wedding they had celebrated among people bonded to them in their hearts, over one of cold pageant.

Among the Mud People, who led hard lives on the plain of the wilds, such a celebration was a rare opportunity to gather in merriment, to feast, to dance, and to tell stories. Kahlan knew of no other instance of an outsider being accepted as Mud People, so such a wedding was unprecedented. She suspected it would become part of their lore, the story repeated in future gatherings by dancers dressed in elaborate grass-and-hide costumes, their faces painted with masks of black and white mud.

"I do believe you're plying an innocent girl with your magic touch," she teased, breathlessly. She was beginning to forget how weak and weary her legs were.

Richard rolled onto his back to catch his breath. "Do you suppose we ought to go out there and see what Zedd is up to?"

Kahlan playfully smacked the back of her hand against his ribs. "Why Lord Rahl, I think you really are bored with your new wife. First the chickens, then tava bread, and now your grandfather."

Richard was watching the door again. "I smell blood."

Kahlan sat up. "Probably just some game brought back by a hunting party. If there really was trouble, Richard, we would know about it. We have people guarding us. In fact, we have the whole village watching over us. No one could get past the Mud People hunters unseen. There would at least be an alarm and everyone would know about it."

She wasn't sure if he even heard her. He was stone still, his attention riveted on the door. When Kahlan's fingers glided up his arm and her hand rested lightly on his shoulder, his muscles finally slackened and he turned to her.

"You're right." His smile was apologetic. "I guess I can't seem to let myself relax."

Nearly her whole life, Kahlan had trod the halls of power and authority. From a young age she had been disciplined in responsibility and obligation, and schooled in the threats that always shadowed her. She was well steeled to it all by the time she had been called upon to lead the alliance of the Midlands.

Richard had grown up very differently, and had gone onto fulfill his passion for his forested homeland by becoming a woods guide. Turmoil, trial, and destiny had thrust him into a new life as leader of the D'Haran Empire. Vigilance was his valuable ally and difficult to dismiss.

She saw his hand idly skim over his clothes. He was looking for his sword. He'd had to travel to the Mud People's village without it.

Countless times, she had seen him absently and without conscious thought reassure himself that it was at hand. It had been his companion for months, through a crucible of change-both his, and the world's. It was his protector, and he, in turn, was the protector of that singular sword and the post it represented.

In a way, the Sword of Truth was but a talisman. It was the hand wielding the sword that was the power; as the Seeker of Truth, he was the true weapon. In some ways, it was only a symbol of his post, much as the distinctive white dress was a symbol of hers.

Kahlan leaned forward and kissed him. His arms returned to her. She playfully pulled him back down on top of her. "So, how does it feel being married to the Mother Confessor herself?"

He slipped onto an elbow beside her and gazed down into her eyes. "Wonderful," he murmured. "Wonderful and inspiring. And tiring." With a gentle finger he traced the line of her jaw. "And how does it feel being married to the Lord Rahl?"

A throaty laugh burbled up. "Sticky." Richard chuckled and stuffed a piece of tava bread in her mouth. He sat up and set the brimming wooden platter down between them. Tava bread, made from tava roots, was a staple of the Mud People. Served with nearly every meal, it was eaten by itself, wrapped around other foods, and used as a scoop for porridge and stews. Dried into biscuits, it was carried on long hunts.

Kahlan yawned as she stretched, feeling relieved that he was no longer preoccupied by what was beyond the door. She kissed his cheek at seeing him once again at ease.

Under a layer of warm tava bread he found roasted peppers, onions, mushroom caps as broad as her hand, turnips, and boiled greens. There were even several rice cakes. Richard took a bite out of a turnip before rolling some of the greens, a mushroom, and a pepper in a piece of tava bread and handing it to her.

In a reflective tone, he said, "I wish we could stay in here forever."

Kahlan pulled the blanket over her lap. She knew what he meant. Outside, the world awaited them.

"Well..." she said, batting her eyelashes at him, "just because Zedd came and told us the elders want their spirit house back, that doesn't mean we have to surrender it until we're good and ready."

Richard took in her frolicsome offer with a mannered smile. "Zedd was just using the elders as an excuse. He wants me."

She bit into the roll he had given her as she watched him absently break a rice cake in half, his thoughts seeming to drift from what he was doing.

"He hasn't seen you for months." With a finger, she wiped away juice as it rolled down her chin. "He's eager to hear all you've been through, and about the things you've learned." He nodded absently as she sucked the juice from her finger. "He loves you, Richard. There are things he needs to teach you."

"That old man has been teaching me since I was born." He smiled distantly. "I love him, too."

Richard enfolded mushrooms, greens, pepper and onion in tava bread and took a big bite. Kahlan pulled strands of limp greens from her roll and nibbled them as she listened to the slow crackle of the fire and the distant music.

When he finished, Richard rooted under the stack of tava bread and came up with a dried plum. "All that time, and I never knew he was more than my beloved friend; I never suspected he was my grandfather, and more than a simple man."

He bit off half the plum and offered her the other half.

"He was protecting you, Richard. Being your friend was the most important thing for you to know." She took the proffered plum and popped it in her mouth. She studied his handsome features as she chewed.

With her fingertips, she turned his face to look up at her. She understood his larger concerns. "Zedd is back with us, now, Richard. He'll help us. His counsel will be a comfort as well as an aid."

"You're right. Who better to counsel us than the likes of Zedd?" Richard pulled his clothes close. "And he is no doubt impatient to hear everything."

As Richard drew his black pants on, Kahlan put a rice cake between her teeth and held it there as she tugged things from her pack. She halted and took the rice cake from her mouth.

"We've been separated from Zedd for months-you longer than I. Zedd and Ann will want to hear it all. We'll have to tell it a dozen times before they're satisfied.

"I'd really like to have a bath first. There are some warm springs not too far away."

Richard halted at buttoning his black shirt. "What was it that Zedd and Ann were in such a fret about, last night, before the wedding?"

"Last night?" She pulled her folded shirt from her pack and shook it out.  
"Something about the chimes. I told them I spoke the three chimes. But Zedd said they would take care of it, whatever it was."

Kahlan didn't like to think about that. It gave her goose-flesh to remember her fear and panic. It made her ache with a sick, weak feeling to contemplate what would have happened had she delayed even another moment in speaking those three words. Had she delayed, Richard would now be dead. She banished the memory.

"That's what I thought I remembered." Richard smiled as he winked.  
"Looking at you in your blue wedding dress ... well, I do remember having more important things on my mind at the time."

"The three chimes are supposed to be a simple matter. I guess he did say as much. Zedd, of all people, shouldn't have any trouble with that sort of thing."

"So, how about the bath?"

"What?" He was staring at the door again.

"Bath. Can we go to the springs and have a warm bath before we have to sit down with Zedd and Ann and start telling them long stories?"