

Paladin



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by
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Chapter One

“Alain! This way!”

Bryan’s plated boots thundered on the cobblestones as he led his comrade in arms through Skara Brae’s winding streets, trying to find the source of the black smoke he’d spied spiraling above the rooftops into the blue sky.

“Bryan, that stench,” Alain said. “Could it be—”

“I pray to the Swordfather it is not,” Bryan said, and they reached the edge of a pressing crowd.

“Make way!” he shouted. “We are paladins of the Swordfather! Make way!”

The crackling roar of fire filled his ears as he and Alain pushed through the throng. Fellow paladins held back the screaming spectators as volunteers formed a bucket brigade to a burning building. Above them, a blackened sign swayed—a tailor’s shop. A hanged man swung on a rope hung from the sign. Flames gruesomely licked the crisp flesh.

“Blessed Lady,” said Alain. “What has happened?”

“Help those fighting the fire!” Bryan yelled to him.
“I will deal with this.”

“Aye, Bryan.”

Alain took a bucket from a volunteer and kicked in the shop’s door, then tossed water through the opening. Heat seared Bryan’s cheeks as he looked up at the crisping corpse, and a bright ember flew like a shooting star and singed his beard.

He drew his sword and swung high. A normal sword might have had difficulty parting a heavy rope in one cut, but a paladin of the Swordfather carried a sword that was forged by temple-trained smiths and infused with holy power by temple priests. It cut through the noose’s rope as if it were butter, and the dead man dropped in a smoking heap at his feet.

“Who committed this atrocity?” Bryan bellowed to his fellow paladins. “Who would publicly murder a man without judge and trial?”

“A man?” a gravelly voice scoffed. “That heretic was an animal.”

Bryan swiveled. Out of the burning building stepped a man-mountain with a shock of rust hair. His polished armor gleamed, and the sign of the Swordfather shone on his breastplate. Black smoke billowed behind him as he grinned.

Bryan stared in shock. “Garic, what have you done?”

“Delivered the wrath of the Swordfather upon an unbeliever.” In his spiked fist, Garic held up a carved pendant by its broken leather thong. The worn face of the Fianrath god, the Horned Man, swung before Garic’s triumphant face. “You see how I protect our faithful?”

“How you protected them from a tailor?” Alain cried from where he heaved another bucket of water. “Did you need to burn down all of Skara Brae to prove your point, Garic?”

“An accused citizen of Skara Brae is still due his

trial,” Bryan shouted.

Garic bared his teeth and turned to the crowd.

“The Swordfather’s truth rules above all. Those who forget it”—he eyed Bryan—“court death.”

Bryan advanced, sword in hand.

“Bryan,” Alain called.

A gangly boy in well-tailored clothes broke from the spectators, heaving with sobs. In a furious rush, he collided with Garic and reached for the amulet.

“Give that back,” he cried. “It was my father’s, and his father’s before him.”

“You would attack me, heretic?” Garic yelled above the fire’s roar. He stepped back in alarm, even as his heavy gauntlet landed on the boy’s shoulder and pulled him close. “Stay back! Come no closer!”

“Garic, leave the boy be,” Bryan said in alarm.

“He attacks me,” Garic yelled when the boy lunged again for the amulet dangling just out of his reach. A dagger’s blade flashed in Garic’s grip.

“Garic!” Bryan leapt forward.

The boy froze and sucked in a shuddering breath. Garic’s blade withdrew, bloody. Bryan’s vision whitened as the boy’s eyes shut, his lashes dark against his pale cheeks.

Bryan yanked the slumped youth from Garic’s grip.

“Thus the heretic’s line ends,” Garic said with satisfaction.

Bryan pulled off his leather glove with his teeth as he knelt over the boy. Fingers trembling, he felt for breath from the child’s nostrils, wishing his wife were here to perform her healing miracles with her Baedish herbs and cunning. Alas, it was too late. The boy lay in his fine clothes and growing pool of blood. Bryan rose, his gut hollow.

Garic was leading his men away as if he’d already

forgotten the dead child. On his belt he'd looped the thong of the Fianrath amulet—his new souvenir. Bryan started after him.

Alain caught his arm. "Bryan! No."

"The boy, Alain. Garic staged the whole—"

"Paladins must not be seen fighting each other,"

Alain whispered urgently.

Bryan became aware of the gazes upon him, the frightened crowd still frozen as if by Garic's lingering menace—or by fear of what Bryan would do.

"What are you waiting for? Save your homes," Bryan shouted.

As the spectators sprang into action, Alain continued to hold Bryan fast, as if he expected his friend to run madly after Garic.

"He left these people like raiders do," Bryan growled. "I did not come north to be party to such savagery."

"You came to Skara Brae to bring it the Swordfather's strength and wisdom." Alain released his arm and clapped him on the shoulder. "Let's show these good people what that is."

Alain rejoined the fire fighters while Bryan returned to the murdered boy. He found him in the arms of a wailing woman dressed in a fine kirtle, who pressed his still face to her breast. Somehow, he seemed asleep, and for an absurd second Bryan hoped the boy still lived.

Bryan knelt and bowed his head in prayer to the Blessed Lady. A shove to his shoulder startled him, and he gazed into the stricken, angry eyes of a well-coiffed older woman. She stepped past him to embrace the mother and dead boy, but her eyes remained fixed on him.

"Leave us alone," she said, her proud voice tremulous. "Your Fatherite prayers are not welcome."

Heresy, but Bryan's cheeks burned with shame.

He should have run Garic through, thought Bryan as he and Alain traveled up the winding streets toward the temple of the Swordfather. Instead, he had hesitated. Instead, he had failed his duty.

“Come, Bryan, we saved many people today,” Alain said. “We kept the rest of the buildings from burning and only lost the tailor’s shop. We did hero’s work.”

Bryan snorted. “And none of that heroism would have been necessary but for the actions of a rabid dog who wears our uniform.”

“Forget Garic, my friend.”

“Not until I have words—and more than words—with him for what he’s done.”

Alain stayed Bryan with a hand.

“Bryan,” Alain said gently. “As much as I want to watch you trounce that fool, heed me. Before the people, we must act in unity. Citizens cannot witness the paladins fighting each other in public.”

“That’s why I’ll meet him in our barracks,” Bryan growled.

“That would be a fight to wager on,” Alain sighed. “But you’d only draw the ire of Commander Thorne. You should report Garic instead. Or better yet!” He brightened suddenly. “The morning’s events have made me forget! The word is that you’ll be making captain today, remember? All you must do is wait until Thorne gives you your commission and you’ll have plenty of opportunities to discipline him. Ha ha!”

Bryan curled his lip. “‘Discipline’ is a weak punishment for murder. I shall give him something stronger.”

Alain’s face turned grave. “Bryan. I did not see how the boy died and can’t bear witness. But whatever he did, you will endanger your position—and the life you have built for yourself here—if you take matters into your own hands. I beg you, take the matter to Commander Thorne.”

Bryan ejected a breath. “Your counsel is sound, my

friend. And I pray to the Blessed Lady for your forgiveness when it enters my one ear and leaves by the other.”

When he'd first come to Skara Brae, Bryan had been eager to convert the heathen, but he had no intention of staying beyond his allotted time. Then he fell in love with Synne and her city, and it became his home. Now violence at the hands of his temple was casting a pall over that home. The tailor's death was the third such public execution in the past month. Bryan believed the temple's work was to befriend and convert, and such savage retribution against suspected heretics was, to his eyes, a perversion of the Swordfather's justice. The first to burn had been a tanner, and then a butcher. How could such common folk be a threat warranting immediate death?

“I know that stride,” Alain said as Bryan marched toward the paladin barracks. “A crew of sailors left a tavern by its windows the last time such fearsome aspect possessed you. You cannot do this.”

Bryan strode on.

“Bryan, you are going to be a captain. What example will you set for your troops by brawling?”

“The boy deserves justice.”

“And what of the living?” Alain urged. “What of Synne?”

Bryan slowed.

“Didn't you promise her your captain's wage would pay for her—her—what did you call it? Herb-drying shed? Would you disappoint her, then, and deny her the sage, and thyme, and ginger her baking business needs to grow?”

“She will understand.” Bryan shook off distracting thoughts of Synne and firmly turned Alain aside. “Now delay me no longer. There is little time before—”

The bells of the temple rang, and before Bryan could take another step, his commander, gray-bearded Commander Thorne, stepped out of the barracks before

them, leading a retinue of recruits.

“You two are going the wrong way,” Thorne barked.
“Come along. We’ve a ceremony to attend.”

“Sir.” Alain touched his forehead as Thorne barreled past, then raised a brow at Bryan.

Bryan sighed and fell in with Alain and the recruits.

“How shall we celebrate your new commission?”
Alain asked as they climbed the temple’s steps.

Bryan gave in to his friend’s attempt to distract him. He did not want to bring an angry heart into the Swordfather’s house. He smiled.

“Old veteran, your years of service make Commander Thorne look like a crawling babe. For all we know, *you* may be awarded the captaincy.”

“Everyone in the barracks knows it’s always been between you and Garic in Thorne’s heart,” Alain said. “You must just hope that he finds you just a little prettier than that rust-haired beast.”

Bryan stifled a laugh at his friend’s teasing as they entered the temple and crossed the nave to the apse and the altar of the Swordfather. Paladins from senior soldiers to aspirants gathered under the hawk-like eye of Commander Thorne. Above him, rowdy initiates in their leather jerkins jostled and watched from the gallery.

Bryan bent his knee and bowed his head before the altar. He clasped his sword’s hilt in reverence. Then he rose and joined the commander, hoping to get a word in before the ceremony.

Thorne spoke first. “Garic tells me you interfered with a recent arrest.”

Bryan’s jaw hardened. Did Thorne know all of what had transpired at the tailor’s burning? “There was no arrest. It was mur—”

“Lieutenant,” Thorne said, his gaze upon their

milling comrades. “A united paladin front is the strength of the Swordfather.”

“I understand that, commander, but—”

A loud clanking cut him off. He looked up.

Garic strode into the apse, shining like a star. From his plated boots to the studded pauldrons laced to his shoulders, he wore the most steel of all the paladins, and it bore no soot from the recent execution. His visored helmet bore a bright red plumed crest, like the comb of a prize cock. Bryan saw no reason for such decoration. It signified no rank nor symbol of the Fatherites.

As Commander Thorne stepped forward to greet Garic, Alain leaned in and muttered in Bryan’s ear. “Each day, he surprises with fresh fancies. I remember his first purchase after his sword was not a breastplate but those gauntlets, festooned with gadlings. We should have known his temperament then. Shiny on the outside, twisted on the inside.”

Bryan’s gaze dropped to the spiked knuckles Alain referred to and said nothing.

“His grace,” someone murmured.

Heads turned and voices died as a figure approached them, long robes gently sweeping.

High Prefect Nerian, assistant to Bishop Henred, was tasked with the day-to-day running of the temple and the paladins and priests who served it. He was tall and thin, his long-fingered hands pressed together before him in meditation. With his shaven head, his face’s beauty was apparent, emphasizing his sculpted cheekbones, lips, and dimpled chin. His pleasant and pale-eyed gaze was far away, as if he dwelled on private dedications to the divine.

When Bryan witnessed such beings of peace, he felt reaffirmed of his own purpose. He was a warrior to keep such people safe.

Nerian mounted the altar’s steps and turned to address the paladins with gentle regard.

“You know what occasion we gather for,” he said.

“We choose a captain today. I would dwell on his merits, but I know this good servant would not fault me for raising a troubling matter that must be spoken of first. One that will darken your hearts as much as it does mine—that heresy thrives in our fair city.”

He raised his solemn eyes to the initiates in the gallery. “Though our streets seem safe, and though the summer sun shines upon Skara Brae like our Blessed Lady’s benevolence, a black taint has begun to infect the shadows, and magic of the darkest sort spreads like a plague, carried by wicked agents enslaved to unholy realms. It may seem harmless enough to some. A good luck charm here, a corn husk dolly there, an old rhyme said over baking bread or fresh milk, but these old superstitions are not innocent. They prey on the innocent! They are a deliberate campaign to lead the foolish and unlearned astray. To lure them from the true teachings of the temple and into heresy and paganism! Thus, in the Swordfather’s name, I issue to you a holy order—if you find cultists of the old gods among the good people of Skara Brae, no matter how ordinary or unassuming they might appear, do not hesitate to drag them into the light and show them the error of their ways! The people must be made aware of the cancer that hides in their midst!”

“In the Swordfather’s name,” cried Commander Thorne.

The paladins raised their fists and shouted. “In the Swordfather’s name!”

Nerian nodded approvingly and waited for the initiates to quiet.

“And now, I present to you your new captain.” He raised a graceful hand. “Step forward . . . Paladin Captain Garlic.”

Chapter Two

Garic stepped forward as Commander Thorne led the assembled paladins in drawing and raising their swords in salute. He beamed as he took Nerian's hand and kissed his ring. The paladins cheered him, but to Bryan, the noise was a distant buzzing.

He watched in a daze as Nerian's warning words rang in his mind, obliterating any concerns he'd had for the captaincy. How could he reconcile such dire revelations with what he knew of Skara Brae and its citizens? Were they blasphemous? Certainly. Sometimes flamboyantly so. But cultists? He could scarce believe it. Skara Brae seemed such a peaceful place, its citizens as ordinary and unthreatening as any in Caith or Lestras. Could evil truly lurk in their hearts, unsuspected? Could the tailor and his son and their family really be agents of darkness? Should he not have felt some taint as he talked with them, walked among them, like a chill to his soul?

The boy's last look of shock flashed through

Bryan's mind as he approached and clasped Garic's forearm in begrudging congratulations. Had Garic been right after all, even while falsely accusing the child of attempting murder?

Can Garic see corruption where I cannot? he wondered. *Or does he see it where it is not?*

With his task done, Nerian blessed them all and walked from the gathering. Bryan watched him as he disappeared behind the columns for the side aisle, then made to follow him.

"Ho, deep thinker," Alain said, smirking and clapping him on the shoulder. "Why do you not give this joyous occasion your gayest face? I thought you'd be relieved at the announcement. Now your piety will not be seen to be tainted by ambition, nor your service sullied by the politics of leadership. Perhaps you are troubled because you won't be able to complete your unfinished garden retreat—which you deign to call a drying shed."

"I am troubled by his grace's talk of a plague of darkness," Bryan said gravely. "We have both heard mutterings in the barracks of such things, but I paid them no heed. The rumormongering of overeager recruits, I thought. But if High Prefect Nerian says that it is true, then . . ."

He shook his head. "How could I not have noticed such a thing taking root in our fair city. Have I been blind?"

"Evil has that nature," said Alain. "The skill to deceive. Even those closest to us may harbor dark intention."

Bryan tried not to think of Garic.

He turned to Alain. "Synne said she would meet me on the temple steps after the ceremony. Could you wait for her and tell her I will return soon? I must speak a moment with Nerian."

At the end of the temple's side aisle, a narrow stone archway opened onto winding stone steps that led down into darkness. Bryan descended them to the catacombs below the temple proper, which had once been the keep of a pre-Fatherite castle and was now the quarters and offices of the high prefect.

Alain often joked that this was the only temple of the Swordfather where the prefect quartered in a monk's cell, but Bryan thought such dedication to sacred solitude admirable. Only a lone torch midway down the stairs lit the dark depths, and he waved away dusty cobwebs overhead. Unlike the solemn quiet of the church above, where people worshiped in commonality, the silence in the stairwell was lonely and absolute. Already, he felt he'd entered a forgotten place.

When he set foot in the arched stone hall of the catacombs, he saw the massive keep doors at the end, lit by two torches, and as he approached them, the great iron wheel that locked them suddenly spun counterclockwise, squeaking noisily. One door cracked open, groaning with weight, and Nerian emerged, carrying a locked and leather-bound book. The priest paused at the sight of Bryan.

"Bryan," he greeted warmly. "I can guess what brings you to me. The captaincy."

Bryan bowed. "It is not the captaincy itself that brings me to you, your grace. It is the man appointed to the position."

"As I said." Nerian smiled. "The captaincy. Come. Let us leave these dreary depths while you tell me your concerns."

"Thank you, High Prefect." Bryan escorted the priest back to the stairwell. "I was present at the tragedy earlier today. A man and a boy died because Garic overstepped the law. He executed citizens in the street without arrest and trial."

Nerian nodded as they mounted the steps. "Garic's hand, indeed, is a heavy one."

"If you feel this way, why did you . . . ?"

The priest sighed. "I share your doubts in promoting him. But he is Bishop Henred's choice, and I bow to the wisdom of my superior, who believes Garic is what our temple—and Skara Brae—need right now."

"Yet these . . . burnings. They are not the Swordfather's way," said Bryan. "Though we Fatherites are firm, we are kind, welcoming the uninitiated to see our truth. What I've read in the Swordfather's book—"

"Bryan." Nerian's tone was pleasantly surprised. "You read?"

"I have always done so, your grace." Bryan felt flustered. "As an orphan of the temple, the good priests taught me my letters."

"This is why you are a good man. You are a son of the temple itself." Nerian nodded sagely. "But such knowledge as books give, Bryan, need guidance. I've not seen you among my students in the scripture studies I lead."

Embarrassment kept Bryan's mouth closed. He preferred to share such studies with Synne at home, who had converted to his faith when they married.

"Attend my studies," Nerian urged. "Then may you receive the Swordfather's words as they were intended to be heard."

"Thank you, your grace. But I feel I must warn you—"

"Bryan." Nerian's gaze turned grave. "His Excellency's decision was not a frivolous one. I will give you the secret that led to it, but you must not repeat it."

They halted in the dim flicker of the stairwell's lone torch and Nerian leaned to Bryan's ear. His whisper was a breath penetrating Bryan's mind.

"An ancient evil has come to Skara Brae, Bryan, ensnaring it in a web of corruption. Lust spells degrade good men, murder curses kill them, and wicked carnal rites are performed in debasement of the Swordfather. I speak of the worshippers of the first men—the Charn."

Bryan's head snapped up, a chill shivering his bones. "Your grace . . . are not such bogeymen mere stories? Crones' tales?"

Nerian shook his head. "Tales meant to scare children do not come from air. They hold the grains of truth, echoes of a darker past. As upholder of the one true faith, you know even the suspicion of such malevolence must not thrive." He smiled sadly. "But I also know you as a man with a generous heart, and though I would normally call that a blessing, such forgiveness can be . . . dangerous in times like these. Be cautious, Bryan. Be vigilant. You may find corruption where you least expect it."

Bryan nodded, his mind once again turning to the tailor and his son, and the grandmother who'd chased him off with her angry words. Were they not merely heretics? Were they also Charn worshippers?

"I . . . I will," he said at last.

Nerian sighed and clapped him on his shoulder, then started up the stairs again. "Enough of dark things. Let us go up into the light. Your wife must be waiting for you, as usual."

Bryan looked up as they emerged from the stairwell and crossed to the temple door. He did not know Nerian knew of Synne. Even among his fellow paladins, he kept his family life to himself. Could they have met at service? It seemed unlikely. Synne preferred to worship at the temple of the Blessed Lady, not the house of the Swordfather.

"You . . . you know Synne?"

As Nerian led Bryan out onto the steps, he gave a gentle laugh. "I may be one who secludes himself, but I am not entirely a hermit." He gestured in the direction where Synne would set up her wares. "I buy a sweet cake from her every morning."

Bryan schooled his features from expressing more surprise. When Synne shared the happenings of her day with him, she'd never mentioned meeting the high prefect.

Before he could comment, the priest's gaze focused beyond his shoulder. "Ah, and here she is now."

Chapter Three

Synne walked between two men as she crossed the market, but for a moment Bryan saw nothing but her gentle stride and swaying hips, her lush red hair, her green, front-laced kirtle that accentuated the pale skin of her neck and chest.

He felt himself the luckiest of men, and only slowly did the world around her creep into his consciousness. The twilight market, the hawkers closing their stalls, her two companions. There to her left was Alain, waving and grinning as they approached the steps, and to her right, a tall, lanky man with the dark skin and dreadlocks of the Barabi people. He was dressed in a seaman's loose tunic and trousers beneath his traveler's cloak. His ringed fingers rested lightly on his scimitar's hilt, and his familiar smile warmed Bryan's heart.

Alain bowed to Nerian as the trio stopped before him. "Do we intrude, your grace? We've come to meet Bryan."

"Our conversation was concluding," Nerian said

pleasantly. “What newcomer of Barabi visits our humble city? Welcome to the temple of the Swordfather.”

“High Prefect,” said Bryan. “This is my old friend Captain Forak of the fabled golden city, Sennar. And here, my good wife, Synne. His grace had enquired after your health,” he added to Synne.

“Indeed.” Nerian bowed his head, his serene gaze upon Synne.

Synne bowed her head in a gesture that might have been construed as shyness, but Bryan spied a narrowing of her green eyes that spoke of displeasure.

Alain cleared his throat in the silence that followed. “We’ll waste no more of your time, High Prefect. We must show good captain Forak the virtues of our fair city before more sunlight flees.”

“Then I wish you a joyous evening.”

Nerian bowed, and Synne—apparently taking that as permission to leave—took Bryan’s arm and turned away. Bryan had no choice but to fall in step. He glanced back apologetically and saw Nerian’s gaze following them, or perhaps just Synne.

But before he could be sure, Forak threw an arm around his shoulder and slapped his chest.

“Bryan! It is good to see you again!”

“And you, my friend!” said Bryan. “Where can we go to better reunite?”

“Let us to the streets.” Forak grinned. “There’s an inn that serves the most succulent of roasts, and I want my friends to dine there.”

“Lead on,” Bryan said.

As the sea captain led them through the market, Bryan fell back with Synne.

“Your manner with his grace seemed cool just now,” he said in a hushed tone.

“It was.”

“Synne, he is my master.”

She glanced warily over her shoulder, as if Nerian

might materialize right then. "Which is why I never mentioned this to you before. That one watches me every morning as I lay out my goods in the market. It's unnerving. And when he approaches, his words are . . ." Synne shivered. "Too silky."

"What?" Bryan held her hand to help her down a brief set of stone stairs, and she lifted her skirts. "Synne, he is a holy man! You mistake his serenity, his meditative stare. His thoughts are with the Swordfather, not . . ."

The steps allowed his wife to meet his gaze at eye level, and she paused, glaring. "This is why I didn't tell you. Believe me when I say that priest has an unpriestly gaze."

Once free of the market's pressing crowds, the party wound down the snaking streets toward the poorer neighborhoods.

"We would have been dining with two captains tonight," Alain sighed. "But alas, captaincy for Bryan was not meant to be."

Forak glanced back at Bryan. "Ah, friend, when Alain told me, I couldn't believe it. You who were the lone defender of Eir Taun against the Fichti raiders. You who sank a pirate ship with only your fists and teeth!" He gestured at the city at large. "What warrior's heart could shine brighter than Bryan's?"

"It is no great matter," Bryan said. "High Prefect Nerian says Bishop Henred believes Garic is the captain the temple needs now."

"Then the temple does not know the value of its servant." Forak turned to Alain and Synne. "Has he ever told you? When he was a wild urchin of the street, the Fatherite priests caught him and shaved his head to rid it of lice, then tattooed the sign of Swordfather upon his bald pate. A grateful Bryan has been their devout son ever

since.”

“I was grateful my head no longer itched,” Bryan protested.

“And here I thought I knew all of Bryan’s tattoos,” Synne exclaimed.

“What, my lady?” laughed Alain. “Do you not “Hhhknow Bryan’s every inch?”

Bryan kicked at Alain in good humor while Forak laughed heartily.

When his friends returned their attention to the street, Bryan glanced at Synne.

“Are you disappointed?” he said. “About the captaincy.”

She shook her head as they sidestepped a passing cart. “I am only disappointed it did not go to one deserving. You would have brought more peace to our streets and less fear. Bryan . . .” She held his arm in urgency. “I heard there was another burning today. Was it really paladins who did it?”

Bryan glanced at Alain, uncertain if his comrade overheard while he chatted earnestly with Forak.

“I told my customers it wasn’t,” Synne continued. “It couldn’t be.”

Bryan patted her hand. “We will discuss it later.”

Synne sighed. “The heart of Skara Brae has changed. People talk less now at market, especially while trading within the shadows of the temple. They fear to speak their mind.”

“Yet the peddler selling Fatherite amulets is quite vocal in his praises of our temple,” Alain said, looking around.

“Oh yes, I know of whom you speak. He is selling very well,” Synne said. “As do any who freely and loudly imitate his platitudes.”

“Those who are loyal to the Swordfather have nothing to fear,” Bryan assured her.

“Yet everyone in Skara Brae is in fear, love. Even of

you.”

Startled by Synne’s words, Bryan looked around. The narrow street was filled with folk tromping wearily home after a day’s labor, carrying tools or pushing barrows, just like they always had, but were they giving a wider berth to himself and Alain now? Were they averting their gazes? From a window above a line of hung clothes, a wizened crone stared down at him coldly. Her hard gaze reminded him of the grandmother, kneeling over her dead grandson. Bryan turned away.

I am your protector, he wished to tell her. But with paladins like Garic murdering people in the street, would she believe him?

“Forak, after months at sea, how does our fair city appear to you?” Alain said.

“Beautiful as always, friends, though as a city of wild Caith, it seems this time to fail its spirited reputation. Its light heart is somber. It is in sore need of more color, joviality, and debauchery.”

“That is what you say of Lestras,” said Alain.

“I know,” Forak said. “That is because you are trying so hard to make Caith as dull as Lestras.”

Synne hugged Bryan’s arm. “Not all Lestradae are dull.”

“Bryan is still jovial.”

“Ah, how devotion doth color a woman’s perceptions,” Alain sighed, and Bryan chuckled.

When they turned the corner, Forak’s genial face turned grave, and Bryan saw the cause. Small urchins played, using sticks to knock about a straw man swinging from a building’s beam.

“Burn him! Burn the heretic!” they chanted gleefully.

Bryan lunged at the urchins with a growl, scattering them. “Do not play at murder, you snipes!”

He drew his sword and cut down their straw man. The boys jeered.

He caught one and shook him by the scruff. "Do you hear me? It is no game!"

"Bryan," said Synne.

He shoved the boy away, and he ran off with the others. "We're only doing what you were doing," he shouted over his shoulder.

When Bryan turned back to Synne, her wide-eyed gaze froze him.

"Then it's true? It was paladins who burned the tailor today? And his shop? And murdered his son?"

"Not now, Synne," said Bryan.

"What threat was a little boy to an armored paladin?" she cried.

"Synne, not now."

Forak glanced back, and Synne closed her mouth, then turned and walked on.

Forak's favored inn lay tucked at the southern end of Skara Brae, far from port and temple. It sat among the humbler dwellings of thatched roofs and wattle and daub walls.

Night had fallen by the time they reached it, and the proprietress was lighting lanterns as they entered. In the dining area, a fire lit the hearth, golden mead flowed, and lively conversations filled the air.

"Ah yes," said Bryan. "We know this place. Our house is only a few streets away, and the landlady buys from Synne."

Synne was still simmering with anger, but she swallowed it to make a polite reply. "She does. I bring her a basket of fresh biscuits every morning."

Forak laughed. "Now I know who to thank for the biscuits that filled my morning belly."

"Synne prays over them for our Blessed Lady's favor," Alain said. "Thus do I feel thrice blessed when I am

fortunate enough to eat them—which is only when Bryan hasn't eaten them all first."

"Anything for Bryan," Synne said.

The proprietress approached with a hearty greeting for Forak and Synne, and then led them to a table by the dark windows.

Once seated, Synne seemed to set aside her anger. She gazed at Bryan with grudging fondness. "I did plan a celebratory meal for you, husband, but Forak insisted that we all dine with him."

"There is nothing to celebrate for myself, but I gladly cheer Forak's return to Skara Brae," Bryan said. "Yet, Forak, do you insult my wife by not letting her show off her culinary skills?"

"Oh, friend," Forak protested while Alain laughed loudly. "And my good dame Synne! Never would I slur your powers over the cooking pot. But as a man of the sea, I must confess—I am very tired of fish."

"And we all know Bryan favors only the ocean's gifts and the humble vittles of priests that grow under the ground." Alain made a face of disgust. "Ugh."

"Synne is a sorceress of the sauce," Bryan said. "You have never known root vegetables until you have tasted hers."

"Enough." Forak raised his hands. "Let Synne have a rest from pleasing your palate. I desire red meat. Or winged meat. Anything but fish."

"Hear hear, captain," cried Alain gaily.

The captain's appetite was healthy and his purse generous. Cuts of roasted pig came to the table accompanied by blood sausage, loaves of Synne's best bread, fresh grapes, apples, pears, and plums—all fruit Forak could only dream of while at sea. The landlady even brought wild cherries for her favorite guest.

But Bryan did not think he imagined the anxiousness of the proprietress's gaze whenever it fell upon him or Alain, as if she expected trouble, and it quelled his

appetite.

“Perhaps I should give up the sword and go to sea if it means dining this well,” Alain declared.

“You would have to pierce your earlobes with golden hoops, Alain,” Synne teased.

“If they’ll make me as pretty as Forak, I will.” He waved a crust of bread. “Now, captain, confess. How have you paid for this banquet? Did you find buried treasure on your last adventure?”

“I have no tall tale to tell,” Forak said with a grin. “And if it included treasure, I would never tell it.”

“Shrewd,” said Alain.

“This last voyage was merely laborious, fraught with delays and cumbersome negotiations. From faraway lands I brought fine silk, the most highly sought of exotic spices, and wines prized by princes. Skara Brae’s merchants have been most generous in their compensation.” Forak produced a small, flat parcel from his belt pouch and presented it to Synne. “For the dame. I hope it pleases.”

Synne accepted the parcel, delight lighting her eyes. She inhaled deeply of the spice packet. “Mmm . . . I know this scent. It is the most potent of its kind, cultivated in far Sinae. My thanks, Forak. I might win our harvest fair’s baking prize with this.” She tucked it into her chemise’s bosom with a pat.

“Ah, and what will the fair Synne enter into Skara Brae’s most celebrated festival?” Alain pressed. “One of your delicious custard tarts? A honey cake? A fruit pie?”

“Bryan shall be the first to taste and know,” she said.

Forak spread his hands. “And this is why Bryan has grown bigger! I thought his bulk was due to muscle and vigor. No, it is from butter!”

He and Alain laughed. Bryan grinned good-naturedly.

“But something is troubling his appetite tonight.” Synne stroked the back of his neck. “Husband, you have

hardly touched this good meal.”

“Oh, he gets morose when he hasn’t given a wrongdoer his comeuppance,” Alain said. “You still owe Garlic a fist to his nose, don’t you, Bryan?”

“Who is this Garlic?” Forak asked.

Alain flicked a glance at Synne, as if realizing he’d said too much. “Er, that burning I told you about. ’Twas Garlic did the deed.”

“I remember,” said Forak. “He burned the tailor right in front of you. And killed his son too.”

Synne’s comforting touch froze at Bryan’s neck. She faced him, and in her eyes, he saw more than anger. A reaction he never wanted to see from her—accusation.

“You were there?” she asked. “You were both there? And you did nothing?”

“It . . . it was over before we could stop it,” Bryan said. “We arrived too late.”

“But you did not take Garlic to task?” Synne demanded. “You did not arrest him on the spot?”

Bryan lowered his eyes. “I could not.”

“Could not or would not?”

Heat rose in Bryan’s cheeks. He could not meet her gaze. “Paladins . . . We . . . We must not fight in public. We must appear united before the citizenry.”

Even as he said the words, they rang hollow and flat in the air. He felt them fragment like a falsehood.

“What are you saying, Bryan?” Synne demanded. “Who is it that the Swordfather bids you protect? The downtrodden, or each other?”

“I . . .”

There was a commotion at the inn’s entrance. An armored paladin jostled patrons in her hurry to enter, and the innkeeper’s frightened gaze followed her as she headed directly to Forak’s table.

Bryan remembered her—a promising aspirant and the youngest to receive the full rank of paladin. Her name was Dael. She bowed quickly before him. He breathed a

sigh of guilty relief. The interruption had saved him from answering Synne's question.

"Sir," Dael said. "Garic has heard a rumor that heretics have taken refuge nearby, and he is preparing to make another arrest."

"And we know too well what Garic means by 'arrest,'" said Alain.

Bryan stood. "We must find them first."

Alain rose as well. "Where, Dael? And no, you must not lead us." He grasped the young woman's shoulder. "We old soldiers can afford to defy our new captain, but you cannot."

Dael nodded, then turned to Bryan. "There are many among us who support you, sir."

"Thank you, Dael." Bryan turned to Forak. "Escort Synne home safely."

"Good luck, my friend," Forak said quickly.

"Bryan," Synne said.

He braced for her words, but she held out her hand, and her green-eyed gaze held fire. "Stand by the truth that's in your heart."

He pressed his lips to her fingers, then hurried after Alain.

Once outside, Dael pointed toward rooftops Bryan knew.

"That way, sir. Three streets over."

Bryan and Alain ran down the crooked alleyways. Clouds obscured the moon and darkened the city, but Bryan did not need a lantern to find his way. This was his corner of Skara Brae. Once they found the so-called heretics, he knew where to hide them should Garic search for them.

"How do you wish this handled, Bryan?" Alain asked as they ran.

"My purpose is simple," Bryan said. "I will not once more fail the accused. Garic will not kill again."

Bryan led Alain around a goat's pen, over fences, through yards and stables, and finally down a narrow alley.

"Bryan, is this not the way to your home?" asked Alain.

A scrawny old man with a lantern stood at the end of the alley. He waved his light as he saw them. Bryan knew him as a neighbor. Angry shouts rose behind the man, and more lights danced and illuminated the shadows.

"Bryan, Bryan," the old man called. "I was the one who told the young paladin. The heretics, they're hiding in your own home!"

"What?" said Bryan. "Are you certain?"

"Yes!" said the old man. "And remember, I was the one who told, not that rabble. I deserve the reward!"

"Return to your own house," Bryan ordered and ran past.

"I deserve the reward!" the man yelled.

Bryan and Alain turned onto his street, then halted. People bearing torches were gathered before his cottage. Two men readied a piece of lumber to pound his front door.

"Get the heretics!" the crowd cried. "Burn them!"

Bryan charged into the crowd and kicked at the men holding the wood. They dropped it and scurried back.

"Back," Bryan growled. "Move back and put out those torches!"

"Citizens," Alain bellowed as he joined him. "We commend your enthusiasm, but arrest is the duty of the paladins. Go back to your homes!"

"A priest called us to this holy duty!" a man cried. "We must burn the heretics before they escape!"

"Do as I order or be arrested yourselves," Alain shouted.

While Alain engaged the crowd, Bryan unlocked his door and entered the house.

In the darkness of the main room and the bedchamber, Bryan found no one, but the back door stood open. He crept to it and cautiously entered Synne's garden.

Beyond the neat rows of cabbage, chard, and spinach lay the half-built drying shed. A light shone from the open door, and from within, a woman's voice urgently chanted.

As Bryan neared, he recognized the words as Fianrath prayers. The power inherent in the incantation sent prickles down the back of his neck.

Heathen magic.

Bryan drew his sword. The prayer grew louder and clearer. He peered inside, and through the fragrant bunches of herbs that hung on the drying racks he'd built for Synne, he saw rolled bedding and two traveler's packs next to a portable stove. A red-haired woman in a dusty traveler's cloak knelt beside it, and beneath her eerily glowing palms, a curly-haired dwarf of scant beard and square jaw lay with shut eyes. His bloodied leather jerkin bore a blade's neat tear at the shoulder. Magical fire erupted at the wound.

Bryan lowered his sword, his heart beating loudly in his ears.

"Taurynne," he cried.

Chapter Four

As Bryan watched, the dwarf suddenly reared, coughing mightily. Black smoke spewed from his mouth, then dissipated. Taurynne lowered her hands and their glow ebbed. The mystic fire at the dwarf's shoulder died just as Alain hurried into the shed and halted at Bryan's back.

In the lantern's bright light, the revived dwarf gingerly touched his shoulder.

"I have killed the remaining poison with fire. The wound now knits itself. How do you feel?" Taurynne asked him.

"Did you use magic to heal that dwarf?" Bryan demanded. He sheathed his sword, and Alain did as well.

Alarmed, the dwarf attempted to stand, only to fall back, wincing. "Taurynne, behind you! A Fatherite!"

"Be not afraid, Lwyd," Taurynne said coolly. "The dullard's my son-in-law."

"That's your wife's mother?" Alain exclaimed.

"You . . . you are a Fianrath priestess," Bryan

blurted. "Does Synne know?"

"Ignore his slowness," Taurynne told Lwyd. "My daughter does."

"Explain yourself," Bryan demanded. "How—why are you here in my drying shed?"

"The last time I visited, it was Synne's drying shed." Taurynne sniffed and rose haughtily, hands on her hips and metal bracelets jangling. Stone amulets carved with the faces of Fianrath gods rested on her generous bosom, and from her belt hung various pouches. Though she stood smaller than her daughter, Bryan always felt like an awkward stalk cut down by a scythe in her presence.

She nodded to the space around them. "Thanks to these herbs, I have healed my comrade's grievous wound and drawn out the poison put there by the blade of a Fatherite priest."

"Taurynne, do not lie," Bryan said.

"Aye," Alain protested. "None of the temple's servants may carry arms or do harm. That is why we paladins serve them."

"I have no cause to lie," Taurynne said angrily. "Lwyd, tell them what happened."

Lwyd stood and pulled a neck pouch from beneath his shirt and emptied the contents into his palm—rough, gleaming stones.

"I am a dealer in gems. When a buyer wishes to meet, Taurynne is my negotiator. But the buyer we met tonight had no interest in jewels. He was a Fatherite priest in disguise and tried to seize Taurynne."

"And why would a priest wish to do that?" Bryan exclaimed.

Taurynne smiled and put her hands on her hips. "I've been known to turn a pious gaze."

"I believe he intended capture," Lwyd said gravely. "But why, we do not know."

"And how did you recognize this assailant for a priest? Had his cloak the temple's brooch?" Alain

demanded.

“Aye, had he the amulet? The priest’s ring?” Bryan pressed.

Taurynne snorted. “Of course not, fool. He was masked. But in our struggle his sleeve tore. On his arm was the Fatherite tattoo of the priesthood.”

Alain glanced at Bryan, but Bryan stared at Taurynne.

“In the darkness, you imagined it,” Bryan said.

“Oh? When Lwyd took the poisoned blade for me, that Fatherite coward could not face my magic. He yelled for people to take us!”

“He incited a riot. We would have been killed if Taurynne had not brought us back here,” Lwyd insisted.

“Do not boast of your heretic witchcraft, woman,” Bryan said and gestured to their unpacked belongings. “Have you been living here without my knowledge?”

Footsteps hurried to the shed’s door. Bryan laid a hand on his sword.

“Mother!” Synne’s voice called. “Paladins are coming, looking for heretics. Hide before Bryan—”

She appeared at the entrance with Forak and halted.

“Bryan,” Synne said.

Bryan stared. “You knew.”

“I knew what, husband?”

Bryan pointed at Taurynne. “You knew your mother performed pagan rituals here.”

“She is a healer, Bryan. There is no wrong in that. Mother is to live with us.” Synne raised her chin. “That is why I had you build the shed. So she may . . . do her work.”

“What?” Bryan uttered. “What work?”

“You heard your wife,” said Taurynne, as if speaking to a small child. “I am a healer. For that I need dried herbs, and a place to mix my remedies and see my patients. Thus I need a drying shed.”

“I helped you build a . . . witch’s hut?” Bryan shouted.

"My mother is no witch!" cried Synne.

"Four weeks ago, you twisted your wrist in a fall. Did Synne not make it better with her herbal poultice, just as I taught her?"

Bryan's mind reeled.

"You . . . you still follow the . . ." His voice quavered.

Synne stepped to him in concern. "Bryan." She touched him. "Listen to me. My family's faith . . . it is still who I am. But I love the Blessed Lady and the Spring Wife both. They are both sacred to me."

Bryan snatched back his arm. "How dare you speak such names in the same breath."

"Bryan," said Alain. "Leave this for another time. We must think on what to do now. With your family. Garic is surely on his way."

"I know of a ship departing tonight that can take them," Forak said. "Synne as well."

Bryan stared from Alain to Forak, uncomprehending.

Synne touched him again. "Let my mother and her friend go, Bryan."

"Let them go? I should arrest you as well," Bryan bellowed.

Synne stepped back as if struck.

Taurynne leapt before her daughter, her open palm flying for Bryan's face. He caught her wrist.

Smack!

Bryan blinked, his cheek burning. When he turned, Synne's furious gaze met his. She held her hand as if she'd hurt it.

Just then Garic barreled in, knocking aside drying racks with his sword. Two paladins followed.

"Stand where you are!" Garic shouted. "You are all under arrest."

Garic's soldiers pushed Bryan and the rest into the dark yard as Alain, Synne, and Taurynne protested. Bryan saw Dael holding a lantern with the rest of the young paladins, staring around as if she were in a nightmare. Bryan felt the same.

"Garic, what are you doing?" Alain exclaimed. "A dwarf lay wounded, and a woman saved his life. That is all that happened."

"Let me explain," said Bryan.

"You'll say nothing, heretic," Garic said.

Bryan blinked. "Heretic?"

"Is that not your wife?" Garic pointed at Synne.

"And this heretic her mother? Both are Fianrath witches." He snarled the word. "Do not deny it. Informants told us. How could you not know your own wife practiced such evil? Perhaps even in your own bed."

Bryan lunged. "Still your lying mouth!"

Alain pushed him back. "Bryan, don't."

"You know my medicines cause no harm," shouted Taurynne, struggling in the grip of a paladin. "You paladins come to me for healing all the time!"

"Enough, heretic," Garic snapped.

"Garic, she is not the problem," Bryan growled.

"We must find he who attacked her and the dwarf. They said he bore a priest's tattoo."

Garic gazed in astonishment. "You would accuse one of our church? More heresy."

"It is truth," Lwyd ejected. "One of your priests stabbed me."

"Silence, sub-human!" Garic raised his spiked gauntlet.

"Garic, no!" Bryan stepped forward again.

"You traitor to the Swordfather," Garic snarled.

"You dare defend evil?"

"You make much of nothing, and insult the most virtuous of your comrades," Forak protested.

"There is no evil here," Bryan said. "Only an

herbalist, the dwarf she healed, and a misunderstanding. My comrades, hear me.” He looked around at his fellow paladins. Their faces were stony in the lantern light. “The true criminal is still free.”

“Listen to Bryan,” Alain urged.

Garic drew his sword and turned to Taurynne. “No witches? Let us stick this one and see if she bleeds.”

“Stand down, Garic,” Bryan drew his own weapon and stood before Taurynne.

“Who failed to take this prisoner’s weapon?” Garic barked. He raised his sword. “You would fight me, then, traitor?”

“Hold, hold.” Alain rushed between them and caught their blades in his gauntleted hands. “We are all good servants of the temple here. Hot temper is not the way of the Swordfather. Sheathe your weapons, comrades.”

“Loose me, Alain!” Bryan snapped. “I must defend my family!”

Alain turned toward him, still clutching his sword. “Bryan, please, move back—”

With a gasp, Alain stumbled violently and fell into Bryan’s sword, and, as Bryan watched in stunned horror, the tip sank deeply into the soft flesh of his armpit.

Alain’s astonished brown eyes filled Bryan’s vision.

Chapter Five

Red bloomed beneath Alain's arm as blood stained the point of Bryan's sword.

Garic shouted, "Alain! Bryan, what have you done?"

"A-Alain?" Bryan grabbed him as his feet slipped. His weight felt like sinking stones, then a shove from Garic wrenched him from Bryan's grasp.

"Back, heretic," Garic yelled. "Haven't you done enough?"

"His life spills," Synne cried.

Taurynne struggled to escape a paladin's grip. "Let me go, I can help him."

"Hold the witches," Garic bellowed, shoving back Forak and Lwyd and grabbing Synne. "Let no heretic touch our good comrade."

Bryan fell to his knees by Alain and forced his hand under his breastplate to press it against the leaking wound. Blood squeezed between his fingers and spilled upon the

trampled plants. The ground drank it greedily.

Bryan pressed harder, but Alain's brown eyes fluttered and closed. His breathing stilled. His face was like that of one sleeping, yet he was gone. *Blessed Lady*, Bryan thought. *I have murdered.*

A part of him screamed it was untrue. Alain was in jest. He would open his eyes and laugh at any minute. He glanced at Synne. Tears were streaming down her cheeks.

"Oh, Bryan," she whispered. "My poor Bryan."

Her tears undid him. He slumped over Alain, burying his head in his hands.

"Surrender yourself, coward," snarled Garic, kicking him. "Or better yet, defend yourself."

Bryan raised his head and tried to summon strength to his voice. "We . . . We will go quietly."

"No, Bryan," Forak shouted. "I saw what happened. You—"

"Arrest them all," Garic barked.

The paladins shoved Forak, Taurynne, and Lwyd toward the house, but their din of protest was a faraway roar in Bryan's ears. He was of no help to anyone now. He laid Alain's head gently on the ground, then stood and stepped toward Synne. She opened her arms to him, but Garic jerked her violently back.

"I'll personally arrest this one," Garic said, drawing her close. "She'll be the first to burn."

"Bryan!" Synne cried.

"You cannot do that!" Forak yelled.

"Get your hands off her!" Taurynne shouted.

Bryan saw the panic in Synne's eyes and woke as if from a dream.

He flew at Garic and smashed a fist like a battering ram into his mouth. Garic staggered, and Synne tore away from him, then ducked behind Bryan.

"Forak, to me!" Bryan cried, and punched the nearest paladin.

Forak knocked down the one holding him. With a

holler, Lwyd threw his fist into an aspirant's midsection, and the young man doubled over. Three more jumped him.

Bryan shoved one paladin into another, then pushed Synne toward the back door as the men fell to one side.

"Get to the street. We'll be right behind you. Forak, help me with the others."

Forak knocked back two of the aspirants holding Lwyd and tried to wrest him from the third, but the woman shoved the dwarf into the cabbages and menaced the Barabi with her blade.

As Bryan stepped toward Taurynne, bloody-mouthed Garic rose behind her and pressed his dagger to her throat. He spat out a bloody tooth.

"I'll kill her," Garic snarled. "Stand down, or I'll—"

"Go, you fool," Taurynne yelled. "Before you're surrounded. Protect my daughter."

Bryan looked around. On all sides, the paladins and aspirants were rising again. Another second and he would be trapped. As much as he feared for Taurynne and Lwyd, his mother-in-law was right. His loyalty must lie with his wife.

"You will regret this, Garic," Bryan shouted and turned to flee. "Forak!"

The sea captain ran with Bryan into the cottage and then through it to the darkened street. Bryan ducked as someone swung something at his head. He spun to fight and saw that it was Synne, clutching an iron frying pan in both hands. A horse and prison wagon stood behind her, unattended.

"Oh! I thought you were—" She stopped and looked behind him. "Where is mother?"

"Held hostage," Bryan said. "We must retreat."

"What? No!"

Bryan picked Synne up and dropped her into the driver's seat as Forak leapt into the back.

"Bryan!" Synne shouted. "We have to go back!"

Bryan boarded and slapped the reins over the

horse's back. "Don't worry. He won't burn her as long as we are free."

"Mother!" Synne shouted.

The wagon clattered into the night.

Bryan drove swiftly down the dark streets with ice freezing his soul. Alain's last gaze assailed his memory. Rage welled within him, and he warred with himself over whether he should direct it at Garic, who he was certain had pushed Alain, or his proud, angry self, who had not sheathed his sword when told. But no, he raged because he feared to face his grief, something that was against the commandments of the Blessed Lady. Thus, in her name, he remembered, and he wept, and shook as Synne pressed her face against his shoulder.

Forak had never seen Bryan so unmade.

But what man would not weep when family, friendship, faith, and livelihood had all been burned to the ground in a single stroke? Forak opened his hands and raised his gaze skyward, praying to the moon for swift comfort for his friend.

Bryan slowed the wagon and directed the horse to take shelter beneath the eaves of a forge. It bore an armorsmith's guild sign and was attached at the back to a large house. The forge's embers still glowed but the bellows lay still. An apprentice rose sleepily from behind the grindstone and took the horse's bridle as Bryan hopped down from the wagon and then helped Synne from the driver's seat.

Forak followed and stepped out from beneath the forge's eaves to view the pitch-black street at both its ends. Not one candle lit a window, lamp, or doorway. All seemed

slumbering.

“Why shelter at an armorsmith’s?” he whispered.

“Cregan is a devout Fatherite and a good friend,” Bryan said. His voice was rough with shed tears. “He fashions our armor, our swords. And my sword. I trust him with my life.”

A large-bellied man in his nightshirt peered from the doorway of the house behind with an upheld lantern, his curly hair and beard wild. He gazed at them in surprise.

“Paladin! Is something the matter?”

“Cregan, I seek sanctuary,” Bryan said.

Cregan’s eyes widened, and he stepped out to light the path. “Say no more, my friend. You are a man of honor. My home is yours.”

Bryan motioned to Synne, who kept her bloody hands behind her back. “My wife, Synne. My good friend, Captain Forak.” Forak touched his forehead in greeting.

“Welcome all,” said the blacksmith. “Do you need food? A place to rest?”

“I would first use your chapel, if I might,” Bryan said.

“Of course.” Cregan motioned to the yard behind his house. “A benediction candle is a copper skeatt. Leave your payment in the box.”

Bryan led Synne and Forak to the backyard, which was piled with metal scrap and builder’s supplies, and into which jutted a wing of Cregan’s home, still partially under construction. Bryan entered a small door from which soft candlelight spilled, and Synne followed, while Forak walked on to view the new addition. A grander entrance was being erected, only bones of timber now, leading—from what Forak could see in the night’s darkness—to a sizable hallway. The ceiling was mere ribs open to the night sky, though a pile of wooden planks sat above, ready to be laid into place.

A lantern’s beam fell upon the unfinished hallway, causing long shadows to dance. When Forak turned,

Cregan viewed him curiously.

“Such a vast place,” Forak said. “You even have a chapel. Are the paladins’ armor and weapons blessed here?”

“Oh, no,” Cregan answered jovially. “Mine is only a simple altar. I board Fatherite pilgrims, you see, and it’s good to have a place for them to pray.”

“Indeed.” Forak motioned to the addition. “And you do well by your pilgrims. Such handsome lodgings, fit for a noble.”

“This?” Cregan laughed. “Oh, no, this is for me.”

“Ah, and for your wife and children?”

Cregan laughed again. “Why should I marry when I can hire a cook? The Swordfather and the Blessed Lady have favored my forge with prosperity, and as the temple teaches, ‘The wicked shall suffer when the virtuous prosper.’ I will enjoy the fruits of my labor.”

Forak smiled while Cregan expounded eagerly on his plans, all the while keeping one eye on the chapel door, wondering how his friends fared.

Before the simple altars of the Swordfather and the Blessed Lady, Bryan took off his Fatherite armor. First his breastplate, backplate, and pauldrons, then his vambraces and greaves. The Fatherite symbols engraved into each piece seemed to mock him as the pile grew. Soon, he stood in only his boots, breeches, and quilted gambeson, his belt and sheathed sword in his hand. Bryan fell to his knees before the altar.

“Though it was an accident, Swordfather, I killed my friend. Beloved companion to me . . . brave servant to you.”

With trembling hands, he laid his sword and scabbard upon the altar and bowed his head. “And for this sin, your gift must be denied me. No blade will I wield until Alain’s death be avenged.”

Indeed, his guilt and misery were so great that what he truly wished to do was break his sword over his knee and never touch sharp steel again, but such a symbolic act a paladin of the Swordfather could not carry out unless he wanted to die, for the holy power within the blade was volatile, and erupted if the steel was shattered. And Bryan could not die yet. Not until he had killed Alain's killer first.

Synne's gentle hand rested on his shoulder. She knelt beside him and also prayed. He took her hand and stared at the bloodstains that mottled it. More stains marred the front of her green kirtle—Alain's blood.

The sight of it stabbed his heart with daggers of fresh guilt, and like a wounded animal he tried to twist away from it, find someone else to blame. If only her witch of a mother hadn't sheltered at their home. If only he'd known of his wife's heresy. Somehow, Alain would still be alive, wouldn't he?

Now he was glaring, clenching Synne's hand in his grip. What place did a Fianrath woman have in a chapel of the Swordfather? Particularly one who kept secrets from her husband. Lied to him. Deceived him in his own home!

Synne winced and pulled her hand away, the words she had been about to say dying on her lips as she searched his face.

He hung his head. "I am sorry, wife. I . . . you . . . I don't . . ."

Synne's gaze lowered and her fists clenched. She rose and silently exited.

He stared after her, then turned and prayed again. When finally he stood and belted his gambeson, his reflection in his breastplate drew his eye. Synne had helped polish the armor to blinding brightness. A haggard man stared back at him with a gaze full of anguish. Then he caught sight of Synne's purple and silver embroidery stitched around the collar of his linen undershirt, which peeped from his gambeson—a prayer to the Blessed Lady.

"Our Blessed Lady protect my Bryan from sword

strikes,” Synne had chanted softly while her needle worked. “Merciful Daughter favor him ’gainst the enemy’s blade. Thy loving light shield my Bryan from death’s point and edge.”

Had her prayers all been lies?

Bryan emerged from the chapel into the cool night’s air and found no Synne, only Forak and Cregan standing near the wagon, apparently discussing where to place it.

The smith pointed toward his new addition. “Your lady is enjoying my new kitchen. Go have a look!”

Bryan entered the barebones entryway of the structure. At the far end of a hall made only of wooden beams and crossbraces, a light shone beneath the door of a completed room. Water splashed into an unseen basin.

Bryan opened the heavy door to find a spacious kitchen, well furnished with crockery, sacks of flour and produce, containers for butter, salt, and oil, a table, chairs, a pump, and a wash tub. Fresh fowl and a wild rabbit hung from hooks, ready to be prepared. Synne was straightening from inspecting the stone oven as she wiped her hands on a cloth and looked around the kitchen, taking in every surface and object as if calculating their cost.

“Why have I never met this trusted friend of yours?” she asked.

“Cregan is a very busy man. In addition to the smithy, he houses pilgrims.”

Forak stepped into the room with Cregan, the light of the armorsmith’s lamp dancing.

“Bryan, I’ll prepare a bed for you and your lady,” Cregan said.

Bryan shook his head. “Do not trouble yourself, friend. Dawn will arrive soon enough. We’ll take our rest in the chapel and be gone by morning.”

“Then here is the chapel key,” said Cregan. “If trouble follows you, it will find you protected by the Swordfather.”

“Thank you, Cregan. We could not ask for a better

host.” Bryan took the key and clasped the smith’s forearm.
“Good night.”

“Good night! May the Swordfather and Blessed Lady bless your rest.” Cregan departed down the unfinished hall.

Bryan, Forak, and Synne crept after and peered as Cregan crossed the yard. Once his lamp’s light disappeared into his doorway, the three retreated back to the kitchen.

“We must leave and spy out information on Taurynne and her dwarf friend,” Bryan said to Forak.

“Bryan, stay,” Forak said firmly. “I will go. I know where the prison is, and I am little known in Skara Brae. You would be arrested the moment you showed your face.”

“He is right, husband.” Synne grasped Forak’s arm. “You will find what has become of my mother, Forak? You will return straightaway to let us know?”

“I will. And once we liberate her, I know men who can place she and you on a ship and have you away from Skara Brae before the noon tide.”

“I . . .” Synne dropped her hand, flustered. “Let us rescue her first.”

Forak bowed and started for the door. Bryan accompanied him to the yard, and the captain laid a hand on Bryan’s shoulder.

“You know that Garic shoved Alain,” he said. “I saw it.”

Bryan hung his head. “I suspected it, but I still feel that I have killed him. Had I only lowered my sword when he asked . . .”

Forak embraced him. “You are not to blame. And Synne will tell you the same. Go to her. Listen to her. Let yourself be comforted by her. Now farewell.”

“Wait.” Bryan handed the chapel key to Forak. “Lock us in until your return.”

Forak tucked the key in his coat pocket. “It will be soon, friend. I promise.”

Bryan reentered the kitchen and found Synne building a fire in the oven.

“Cregan is prosperous for a smithy,” she remarked. “Even one who takes in pilgrims.”

“Cregan provides all the arms and armor for the paladins,” Bryan said. “It is a large order, and the temple pays well.”

Synne smiled. “And Cregan wants everyone to know it.”

Bryan scowled. “Must you always mock those blessed with good fortune?”

“Is it strange that I am interested in the success of others? I am a woman of business.”

“And as I now know, more than that,” Bryan snapped.

Synne rose before the crackling oven. “I understand your anger with me.”

“No, you do not.”

“Bryan.” She lay a hand on his arm, then sighed as he shrugged it off. “Bryan, I . . .”

“How can you pray with me when you are a . . . a . . .”

“A witch?” she asked.

There was a creak from behind the kitchen door, and Bryan glanced up.

“Forak?” he called.

“Don’t worry, husband,” Synne sneered. “There’s no one to hear us. You may call me what you wish. Shout it, if you must.”

Bryan sighed. “I am not angry with you, Synne. I just don’t . . .”

Exasperated, Bryan dragged two chairs to the hearth, then motioned for Synne to sit.

“How you glower,” she said as she sat.

He sat as well and crossed his arms.

“I admit it,” she said. “I lied to you, and to the

temple. I hid my true self from you both. I hid that I still keep my old faith. But not from the Swordfather and the Blessed Lady, whom I love as much as you do. They know my faith. They know my heart.”

Bryan scowled. “Do you expect to be forgiven for such a weak excuse?”

Synne leaned in, a plea in her green-eyed gaze. “The sincerity of your faith, Bryan, is one of many reasons why I love you. But now the temple is burning people. Tell me you do not give thanks to the Swordfather for such murder? My love, are you that kind of man?”

Bryan felt the words like the sword thrust that had killed Alain. He mourned his and Alain’s severance from their Fatherite brethren. And more, he mourned the sacred word of the Swordfather, twisted by the likes of Garic into something horrible and cruel. He buried his face in his hands.

Was she even now manipulating him with cunning words?

Synne rose and clasped his head to her breast. Bryan closed his eyes, and a familiar, spicy scent filled his nostrils.

A sudden dread filled his heart, and he raised his head. “Is that cinnamon I smell?”

“Yes. Forak’s gift, remember? For your favorite fruit pie . . .” Synne trailed off as she saw his expression. “Why such a look?”

Bryan stood. “Is cinnamon not an ingredient in Fianrath lust spells?”

Synne stared at him, then stepped back, vibrating, as if her small body harbored the power of lightning. “Was lust all you felt for me?” Her tone bit like the northern wind. “You think our love was a trick?”

Before he could form an answer, she turned away and started pulling pots and pans and dishes from shelves and cupboards. Bryan thought she might fling them all at him, but instead she began to work, finding flour and eggs,

water and milk, and putting them together with a rage that expressed itself in an excess of banging and clattering, furious whisking, and the occasional glare in his direction.

Bryan could not meet her gaze, so he faced the wall and began to clean his boots.

The oven's warmth was at his back, but winter resided in his guts. Behind him the pump briefly gave up water, then came the mixing and kneading of flour and water, the waft of spices added for flavor, the buttering of the pan, the dough being pressed in, the opening and closing of the oven door. Then followed the silence he loved most, that of a baker's patience with the blooming scent of rising bread. He breathed deeply of the comforting smell of hearth and home and lost himself in his simple work.

A while later, he started as a hot pan clattered before him on the table, filled with golden biscuits.

"You'll need your strength when Forak returns. Eat," Synne bade.

Bryan hesitated, wanting to apologize, but unsure what to say.

"They are only biscuits. Do not be afraid of them," she snapped.

Her quick anger angered him. "You didn't say the Lady's prayer over them."

She drew herself up. "I thought a heathen was not permitted to pray to the Lady."

"I . . ."

"If I pray to the Lady you say I must not. If I do not pray to her you say I must. Make up your mind, husband! How can I please you?"

Bryan surged to his feet, angry, and started to the door. Then he stopped and turned back. Synne looked up at him expectantly, but he strode past her and grabbed two biscuits from the pan. They burned his hand, but he held them tight as he stormed out the door.

Later, in the chapel, they slept on opposite sides of the altar. At least, Synne slept. Bryan could only stare at the flames of the candles lining the walls.

She had neatly arranged his armor and sword, then prayed before the altar, as any who loved his god would. He still didn't understand it, and it made him uncomfortable. How could she take comfort in the Swordfather's presence when she herself was living heresy before him? And how could he allow her to do it? He should arrest her. But that would mean turning her over to the likes of Garic. And that he could not allow.

Perhaps sending her away on a boat as Forak had suggested was for the best. Then she might have a life free of terror—of himself and what his temple had become. The thought tore his heart in two.

And what about his temple? The temple that had betrayed him, that had promoted the sadistic Garic. How did he serve an institution blind to its own cruelty?

Father and Lady, he prayed, tell me what to do.

The war in his heart kept him long awake.

Chapter Six

Bryan's dreams were befouled by spiked gauntlets emerging from chilling darkness to snatch Synne from his grasp. No matter how he shielded her, those armored hands were everywhere, and when that pitch black finally swallowed Synne whole, her reproachful eyes condemned him—why did you not live for your heart's truth?

At the edges of fitful sleep, Bryan felt someone creep into the chapel. He balled his hand into a fist.

"Bryan, it is I."

Bryan opened his eyes. Forak stood beside him, the first fingers of dawn casting a blue light upon the forge's yard through the door behind him.

Synne came toward them. "What news?" she whispered urgently.

"We must hurry," Forak said, and handed them both hooded traveling cloaks. "Taurynne and the dwarf are to be hanged at dawn's full light."

Synne pressed her hands to her mouth, suppressing

an anguished cry.

“Garic,” Bryan growled. “Such haste for a blood spectacle speaks to malice.” He pulled on his boots and donned his cloak. Without his armor, he looked like any man of Skara Brae.

“The wagon is ready,” said Forak. “But we must travel swiftly. Synne and I now have bounties upon our heads. The announcements have been made.”

Bryan glanced uneasily at Synne. He did not want her risking capture. He took up his sword, then nodded to Forak.

“Let us go.”

Forak led them out of the chapel to where Cregan’s apprentice stood, holding the horse’s bridle.

“I’ve arranged passage on a ship,” Forak said, liberating a discarded fire iron from Cregan’s rusting scrap pile. “It sails soon, so we must hurry.”

“Bryan.” Cregan approached, his hair and beard now brushed. He wore his leather apron. “You are leaving?”

“We are, friend,” Bryan answered. “And for the sanctuary you gave us, thank you. Speak to no one of our visit.”

He stepped up into the wagon, then paused and looked at his sword as if noticing it for the first time. “What a fool I am. I have forgotten my oath to remain swordless until Alain is avenged.”

He held out the sword to Synne. “Wife, can you return it to the altar?”

She frowned. “Bryan, you need your weapon.”

He shook his head. “The Swordfather and the Blessed Lady will grant me the arms I need. We will rescue your mother. I swear upon our marriage bond. Place my sword with my armor, and we will go.”

“Very well.” Synne took the sword and reentered the chapel.

Bryan jumped down from the wagon and turned to

Forak. "The key. Quickly."

Forak gave him an uneasy look. "Are you certain?"

"I will not endanger her further."

With a grimace, Forak handed over the chapel key, and Bryan swiftly locked the door.

"Bryan?" called Synne from within. She rattled the door handle. "Bryan, the door's locked."

"I'm sorry," he said softly through the door. "We will be quick. And you will be safe."

Bryan handed the key to Cregan, who stared at him, surprised. "Whatever she may say or do, do not let her out. In the Blessed Lady's name, I ask that you keep her safe, Cregan."

"I will," Cregan said. "By the Swordfather I swear it."

Bryan clasped forearms with the armorsmith while Synne banged on the chapel's door.

"Bryan!" she shouted. "Let me out!"

Bryan boarded the wagon with Forak before he could change his mind. As he took the reins, the apprentice grinned up at him.

"Has she been wicked?" The lad snickered. "Did you lock her up to pray?"

Bryan grabbed and shook him. "You'll respect my dame."

He dropped the frightened apprentice, then clucked his tongue at the horse. As they trundled into the street, Forak glanced back.

"She is not going to be happy with you," he said.

"Better that she is angry and alive," Bryan said grimly.

He slapped the horse's flanks with the reins, and the wagon rumbled down the cobbled streets toward the prison.

Skara Brae's prison fortress faced the sea to deter escape, and any rescue attempts from the city's side had

to deal with the high walls protecting the yard. Bored city guards walked those walls and flanked the one raised and iron-toothed gate allowing entry from the street. The entrance was big enough to admit prison wagons and the raucous spectators who trooped in for public executions.

This early, however, no citizens were yet present to see the glum dwarf and the fiery red-haired woman who stood with wrists bound on the platform as the gaunt and sallow hangman leisurely inspected his apparatus. Even the street vendors who sold treats to gawkers had yet to roll their carts in. But that did not mean there were no spectators. The gallows was surrounded by a jostling crowd of paladin initiates and aspirants.

“I came to Skara Brae to see the sea, which no dwarf in the holds of Folaithé can boast of laying eyes upon,” Lwyd said morosely to Taurynne as the hangman placed the noose around his neck and adjusted it fastidiously. “The salted wind that blows e’en now puts a longing in my heart to try sailing that blue expanse. Who knew I’d instead be standing here, looking down on foolish faces such as these?”

“Sub-human!” a young man shouted from the crowd below.

“Imbecilic kit,” Lwyd shouted back. “You’ve a rabbit’s brief life compared to mine.”

“Would you youngling warriors insult dwarf-kind, masters of the forged steel your lives depend upon?” Taurynne said incredulously. She flinched as the hangman laid a noose around her head too.

“Heresy! Creatures like him are our enemies, witch,” a female initiate yelled.

“Herbalist, girl,” said Taurynne. “Speak rightly! Fie! I healed one with your likeness who broke her big toe in mock battle not a week ago.”

The girl shrank back as her companions looked down at her bandaged foot.

Taurynne laughed, then sighed. “I suppose it is good

to laugh before one dies.”

“It is even better,” said Lwyd, “to laugh and not die, but I suppose that is too much to ask.”

Bryan and Forak crouched within a foundry’s tower that stood across a narrow alley from the prison, their perch ten feet above the height of the wall. Below them, a city guard sleepily shouldered his poleaxe and walked the rampart.

Forak handed his seaman’s spyglass to Bryan. “Only two guards at the gate, and they’ve left it invitingly open.”

“Too invitingly,” Bryan whispered back. “Garic may wait in the street.”

“I can handle his men, but what of you?”

“I’ll be the distraction you need.”

Through the glass, he saw two paladins standing at the foot of the gallows, facing the initiates and aspirants who were jeering at the prisoners, while Taurynne and Lwyd scolded them in return.

Then there was new movement in the lens. High Prefect Nerian entered the courtyard flanked by two more paladins. He carried something draped in a cloth. Bryan sighed with relief and handed the glass back to Forak.

“I think our desperate plan may be unnecessary.”

Forak frowned. “Truly? You think Nerian will intercede?”

“The High Prefect is a good and learned man, not a lout like Garic. Indeed, he told me he regretted Garic’s promotion, and only carried it out because it was Henred’s will. He will have seen the trifling crimes of which Taurynne and the dwarf have been accused, and he will pardon them to show the initiates that the temple is capable of justice as well as punishment.”

Forak said nothing but did not look convinced.

Nerian stepped serenely across the yard, his priestly robes gently sweeping, his cloth-draped bundle held to his chest and his pale gaze focused inward, acknowledging neither the initiates nor the aspirants, Lwyd's angry glower, or Taurynne's fierce glare.

He mounted the gallows, then turned and faced the crowd, his gaze focusing now and taking them all in. He smiled.

"Good morning, my brave ones. Before justice is meted out this morning, I would speak to you of—"

"Justice? Ha!" Taurynne shouted behind him.

"Practicing herbalism is no crime! Remember the remedies your dear Baedish mothers used to heal your hurts!"

"Yes," Nerian said, and though he remained calm, somehow his voice carried to the whole yard. "Let us talk of the wisdom of your dear Baedish mothers."

The crowd quieted, and in the foundry tower beyond the prison walls Bryan's heart lifted as the words reached him too. Now would come mercy. The justice that Nerian meted out would be the release of the prisoners, and he and Forak would collect them at the gate.

"My children," Nerian began. "From your earliest days, did not your dear Baedish mothers warn of the evils and corrupting seduction of magic? Tales they had heard from their mothers, and those mothers from their mothers before them. Tales of witches that poisoned wells, elves that lured children from their families, dwarves that enforced impossible contracts, and folk in the forest who worshipped the unspeakable evils that once overrode and ravaged this fair land."

The initiates and aspirants shifted, impatient, as Nerian smiled.

"And did you perhaps, as you grew older and more worldly, begin to think that those tales were just nursery stories, and that the wise women you knew, who you

visited to heal your cuts and ills, and to hear your fortunes, or those dwarves who sold you weapons and armor, and cheerfully put an edge on your blade, were naught but honest folk—simple wise women and tradesmen, as normal as you or me?”

Bryan frowned. What point was Nerian trying to make?

“Well, you should have listened to your mothers,” said Nerian as his smile faded. “For they understood what you do not, that the seduction of evil does not come in the form of a naked nymph luring you to her bower, nor a dwarf who offers you a crystal sword in exchange for your firstborn, but instead comes in the form of a seemingly kindly old lady, or the dwarf who sells you a reasonably priced gem to give to your betrothed.”

Nerian’s voice rose now, becoming the inspiring cry of the priest before an altar. “For the greatest weapon in evil’s arsenal is not a spell or a blood pact, but trust! For when they have tricked you into trusting them, taking them for granted, thinking them harmless, forgetting they are there, *that* is when they have you! Then, when their masters finally rise and call for the end war and the harvesting of souls, you will have already lost, because long ago you let the enemy into your town, your street, your temple, even your home!”

He looked back at Taurynne and Lwyd. “And that is why, even though what these two did may seem insignificant, they must hang. For the crimes they are accused of are not their true crimes. Their true crimes are conspiring with the ancient evils that once destroyed the world with fire and blood, and working toward returning them to their dominion over man. In short, they seek to bring back the unhallowed and bloodthirsty gods of the Charn.”

The initiates and aspirants gasped in horror. Their faces paled.

Behind Nerian, Taurynne blew a raspberry. “You’re

off your nut, priest. It's folk like us who've fought the Charn since before your precious Swordfather was a squirt in his mother's—"

"In the name of our fallen," Nerian shouted, as he pulled a sword from his bundle and held it over his head. "Let justice be done!"

Bryan lowered the spyglass, brain churning. *They let evil into their homes*, Nerian had said. The words rang so closely with the thoughts that had been torturing him since he had found Taurynne healing Lwyd in Synne's drying shed, and since Synne had admitted that she still prayed to the old Fianrath gods. Was it true? Had it been his wife and his mother-in-law's purpose all along to corrupt him? To weaken him and turn him from the Swordfather's truth? Had he been their puppet all this time? Was Nerian right to hang Taurynne and her dwarf friend?

"Bryan," said Forak. "If we are to save them, we must act now!"

Still Bryan hesitated. Nerian's words seemed so convincing. They made him question everything he thought he knew, but . . .

"Bryan?"

But where was Nerian's proof? What he had said about Taurynne and Lwyd could be said about anyone, and believed about anyone because an absence of proof was considered proof of hidden evil. Had there even been a trial? No. They had been arrested last night, and here it was dawn. No trial could have been conducted so quickly. No fair trial, certainly, and execution without trial was not justice.

"Bryan! Please!"

Bryan raised his head. "Yes. Forgive me. Let us act. Go!"

"At once!"

Forak took back his glass and ran down the stairs as Bryan crawled out the tower window onto the foundry's rooftop.

The guard on the prison parapet stood with his back to him, poleaxe laid aside, watching the hanging. Bryan hurried to the roof's other end, then turned and ran forward. He leapt, angling for a spot on the rampart as the alley whisked by below. Landing on his feet, he rolled right into the surprised guard.

"This is the sword of Alain," Nerian cried as he held the blade aloft. "Alain, who was beloved by all and a true son of the Swordfather! Brave Alain, who fell fighting the wickedness of which I speak." He moved the sword slowly back and forth, drawing the crowd's eyes.

"Swordfather above," Nerian called to the sky. "In Alain's name, we shall wipe out this plague in its every form." He swept the sword to point at Lwyd and Taurynne. "Whether it takes the shape of a dwarf or a wise woman, no evil shall escape our sight! Do you, the Swordfather's champions, pledge this in Alain's name? Do you?"

The initiates and aspirants cheered.

Bryan walked quickly down the stairs to the yard, poleaxe at his shoulder and the guard's helmet on his head. He did not want to run and attract the attention of the other guards, but Nerian's voice was rising to a crescendo. The end would come soon. Then he heard Nerian speak Alain's name, chant it, with the crowd calling it back to him, and each repeat stabbed Bryan's heart.

His vision grew red.

He broke into a run.

“Alain!” the crowd shouted. “Alain!”

“Now let us hang these deceivers for Alain!” Nerian yelled.

The paladin flanking Nerian stumbled, a guard’s helmet bouncing off his head and clattering off the scaffold. His comrade fell backward and disappeared, pulled down at the ankle by a hooking poleaxe. The initiates and aspirants gasped and looked around. Nerian turned.

Bryan hauled himself onto the platform and faced them all, raising the polearm. “These innocents did not kill Alain,” he bellowed. “Alain’s murderer is Garic—he who shoved Alain onto my blade!”

Nerian backed away, motioning the remaining paladins forward. “You are in grief, Bryan. Of course you would blame another.”

“I admit to sharing the blame for Alain’s death,” said Bryan. He leapt forward and snatched Alain’s sword from Nerian’s hands before the paladins could reach him, then pointed it at Taurynne and Lwyd. “But these two killed no one and should be freed.”

The paladins swung at him as the high prefect fled down the steps, shouting, “He admits his crime! Arrest him!”

Bryan ducked the paladins’ swords, then shouldered them off the platform and severed the ropes of Taurynne and Lwyd’s nooses with a swing of the poleaxe. As they staggered free, he held Alain’s sword high.

“If you want justice for Alain,” he roared to the initiates and aspirants, “arrest his true killer—Garic!”

Forak burst from a side street and angled the stolen prison wagon toward the gate. The surprised guards scattered before him as he pulled the horse to a halt just

inside the gate and stood up, shoving his fire iron into a link of the gate's pulley chain.

Kicking the release on the gate's windlass, Forak dropped back into his seat and urged the horse once more into a run. The iron-toothed gate fell a few feet as he passed beneath, then jerked to a stop and hung, the fire iron jammed high against the beam above as he thundered toward the gallows.

Paladins, aspirants, and initiates all turned at the sound of Forak's swift-approaching wagon. Clenching Alain's sword in one hand and the reversed poleaxe in the other, Bryan leapt off the gallows into their midst and started cracking heads.

Taurynne kicked the hangman in the knee, then spat at him as he fled. "We're not so easy to kill when we fight back, eh?"

"We should help Bryan with that mob," Lwyd said.

"Do not worry about my son-in-law. He is as savage as the Fichti raiders he once singlehandedly slew. Come. Our rescue is here." She and Lwyd hurried to the back of the gallows as Forak pulled the thundering horse and wagon around it and stopped.

Spying the scimitar at Forak's belt, she held out her bound wrists. "Some assistance, if you please."

Forak grinned. "Your wish is granted, Taurynne, mother of Synne." He whipped his scimitar from its scabbard and cut the rope. Her wrists fell free.

"I did not properly introduce myself when last we met. I am Captain Forak."

"And I am Lwyd, good captain," said the dwarf as Forak sliced his bonds as well. "Good to see you again."

Lwyd jumped to the driver's seat just as the two paladins rushed around the scaffold.

"Captain! Behind!"

Forak turned to meet their swords with steel as Taurynne gathered up her skirts and leapt into the wagon.

“For Alain!”

Bryan knocked the surprised aspirants and initiates in all directions with hard swings of the reversed poleaxe and the scabbarded sword. The rapid blows frightened the throng, and they scurried around confused, drawing their weapons and looking everywhere for their assailant.

“Alain!”

He caught an initiate in the throat with Alain’s scabbard and shoved him to the ground. The boy kissed dirt.

“Alaaaaain!”

An aspirant rushed him with a drawn sword. Bryan slapped it down with the butt of the poleaxe, then knocked the youth back and bashed his pommel against the helmet of a woman who was trying to pull him down, staggering her. Another aspirant leapt for him and Bryan sidestepped, then brought his hilt down on the back of the man’s neck, denting his gorget and weakening his knees.

“Son-in-law!” called Taurynne as Forak turned the wagon. “Come aboard!”

Bryan threw the stunned man into the arms of more attackers, then tossed aside the poleaxe and waded toward her. An initiate blocked his path. Bryan rammed Alain’s pommel into his gut. The man doubled up, and Bryan leapt from his back to the platform as the wagon barreled closer, then into the back as it rumbled by. Lwyd and Taurynne caught him and steadied him.

“We have him!” called the dwarf. “Go! Go!”

Forak lashed the reins and the horse strained for the gate. Bryan held up Alain’s sword and kissed the sign of the Swordfather on the hilt, then looked back as the aspirants and initiates surged after them.

“I will avenge you, my friend. By your sword I swear it.”

“Bryan!” cried Forak. “The gate! I jammed it!”

“I see it,” said Bryan, pulling himself to his feet.

Standing wide, he gripped Alain’s sword as the wagon sped under the archway, then struck at the fire iron stuck in the windlass. It spun free and the gate dropped with a deafening clash just as the horde of initiates skidded to a stop behind it.

“Ha ha!” crowed Taurynne as the wagon slewed into the street. “Trapped by their own gate!”

Chapter Seven

They abandoned the recognizable prison wagon in an alley where Forak had previously left a borrowed turnip cart. In this cart he steered for the docks, where he stopped by a merchant ship unloading grain sacks.

Forak turned to Taurynne and Lwyd. "I have spoken to the captain of this ship. She will take you to Ambardy. It sails in an hour."

"Not without my daughter," said Taurynne.

"And I will not abandon Taurynne," Lwyd said.

"Don't be foolish. You must go now." Bryan's voice was a growl. He wanted to get back to Synne.

"Not without Synne." Taurynne's voice was ice.

"Why didn't you bring her with you so we could depart together?"

"I . . . I wanted to keep her safe from arrest," Bryan said.

"She would have been entirely safe if here now," Taurynne retorted. "And all of us already sailing away from

Skara Brae.”

“A-all of us?” Bryan stuttered.

“There is another ship,” said Forak. “But it leaves at dawn. We will have to hide until then. Perhaps again at Cregan’s?”

“Yes,” Bryan said. “Let us return there. Swiftly.”

As they rode back toward the smithy, Bryan fell silent, unsure what he should do next. He had not really thought beyond the rescue of Taurynne and Lwyd, and now that he was confronted with his future he was at a loss. He had a duty to avenge Alain, and his conflict with Garic, Nerian, and the temple must be resolved somehow. None of that could be accomplished if he left Skara Brae. At the same time, the city was no place for Synne, and the thought of being parted from her was more than he could bear.

Taurynne touched Bryan’s shoulder, startling him. Her gaze was unexpectedly kind. “I prayed to the Boatman for your good friend, Alain, while we were imprisoned. May his soul find rest, and his memory, justice.”

Bryan flinched at Taurynne’s mention of her Fianrath god. “I believe Synne gave such . . . priestess’s prayers for him too.”

Taurynne’s kind gaze evaporated, to be replaced by her usual belittling scowl. “My daughter is no priestess. She ended her training when she wed you. Gave up everything, really. And now that your life as a paladin is over, what can you offer her? The protection of a wanted man? The home that has no doubt been seized by the temple?”

“I still have my love for her,” Bryan said.

“Love doesn’t keep a woman safe or sheltered, and often burdens her with babies she cannot hope to feed or heal. More than love is required for a marriage!”

“Such words. You are a bitter woman.”

Taurynne smacked his head.

“Ouch,” Bryan said.

“I am your mother-in-law, and don’t you forget it.”

Bryan curled his lip. “You speak of keeping Synne safe, yet there you were, in her drying shed, committing heresy.”

Taurynne’s green eyes flashed. Though he knew he was in the right—knew in the Swordfather’s name he stood clad in truth—somehow the very ground that was his life’s foundation crumbled under her fiery gaze.

“This is truth!” he insisted.

“Which truth?” Taurynne asked. “The strength of your heart is your faith, son-in-law, and you have a very strong heart, which I do not wish to weaken now when it must be strong, but if you are to help Synne, you need to decide what faith you follow. Is it the same as your temple’s faith these days? I, as you know, practice the old ways, and am therefore a pagan in Fatherite eyes, but before Henred took over, the temple would have never burned me for it. Now they would. So which faith do you follow? The faith you were raised in, or the faith the temple preaches now? Which truth do you believe? Yours or Henred’s? Yours or Nerian’s?”

Bryan stared at the wagon’s floor, his gaze unseeing. “I do not know what to believe anymore. Nerian spoke of ancient evils returning to Skara Brae and corrupting the unsuspecting, and though I have cause now to doubt him, I have felt it. A pall has settled over the city. Bestial acts are being committed, and fights that last year would have ended at blows are this year ending in blood—murder.”

“Some of those bestial acts were committed by the temple,” Taurynne said.

Bryan sighed. “I’ll admit it, but not all. Nerian said it was the influence of worshipers of the Charn, trying to bring their gods back to Earth, and that the old races and the keepers of the old ways—”

“Yes,” growled Taurynne. “He said it on the gallows, but do not believe him, boy. Ancient evils

may indeed be waking again in Skara Brae, but it is not the Fianrath who summon them. Why, we wise folk fought such wicked forces long before the temple of the Swordfather existed.”

“Women like you, fighting the Charn?” Bryan said incredulously.

Taurynne threw up her hands. “I don’t know how Synne lives with you! Have you ever thought on what it means for a woman of the Baed to live with you, a man of Lestras? A man of the Swordfather? How it must wound her to love a man who serves a temple that hates and fears what she is, that would burn her if they could? How much of her true self must she hide so that she will not lose you? She has remade so much of herself to please you that it is a wonder there is anything left of her at all.”

She pressed a finger to Bryan’s chest, and he felt as if it were piercing his frantically beating heart.

“Yet here she lies,” Taurynne said. “And someday she may die for you.”

Bryan had Forak stop the cart around the corner from Cregan’s forge, then leapt out with him.

“Stay here,” he said to Taurynne and Lwyd.

“Cregan is a Fatherite through and through. He may ask questions if he sees you.”

“Hurry back,” said Taurynne.

Bryan and Forak ran around the corner and waved to Cregan as they approached. His eyes widened as he saw them, and he beckoned for them to follow him around the back of the house.

“Quickly, Bryan. Before someone sees you.”

“We’re here only to retrieve Synne,” Bryan said.

“Where is the chapel’s key?”

“Paladins came. I had to move her to the kitchen.”

Cregan led them to the house’s unfinished addition, and

Bryan and Forak followed him down the skeletal hallway to the kitchen door.

“Synne,” he said as they entered. “Synne, forgive me.”

Synne was not there. Instead, four armored paladins faced them, swords drawn.

“Thank you, Cregan,” the foremost paladin said. “The bounty for the traitor will be added to the one Garic gave you for his wife.”

“Bryan. Two behind us,” Forak said.

Bryan glanced back and saw two paladins creeping toward them down the hallway. Though he had Alain’s sword belted around his waist, he could not use it without breaking his vow to use no blade until his friend’s death was avenged, so, with a roar, he grabbed a flour sack and threw it at Cregan and the four paladins in the kitchen. It burst on impact and spread a blinding white cloud. Bryan pulled Cregan from the sputtering group and spun him into the two coming in from behind. All three fell back into the hallway and he slammed the door on them.

“Hold it shut,” he ordered Forak, then turned to the four men in the kitchen, who were still choking and trying to clear their eyes. He grabbed the helm off one opponent, then bashed him in the head with it, knocking him to the floor in a heap of armor.

He threw the helm at another paladin, then rushed him and slammed him back into the other two. They crashed into the bricks of the stove and flailed wildly, trying to find footing on the flour-coated floor.

“Bryan, hurry,” Forak called as the kitchen door shuddered against his bracing shoulder.

With three punches, Bryan laid all three men out cold, then picked up a pair of heavy cast-iron pans and turned back to Forak.

“Ready. Let them in.”

Forak stepped back and pulled the door open suddenly. Cregan and the two paladins fell in, and then just lay there, as if asleep. Bryan frowned and stepped closer. All three had blue smoke leaking from their nostrils.

“Don’t breathe that smoke!” called Taurynne as she stepped over them from the hall. She held a glass ball in one hand that contained a similar swirling smoke.

Bryan recoiled. “Magic.”

“It saved you, didn’t it?”

Lwyd followed her in. “We heard the commotion and came running. You were betrayed?”

“We were,” Bryan growled. He grabbed Cregan by his shirt front and hauled him to his feet. He looked at Taurynne.

“Will he waken?”

“A few slaps should do it.”

“It will be my pleasure.”

Bryan slammed Cregan against the door post, then slapped him until his eyes opened.

“Bryan!” Cregan squeaked. “I can explain.”

“No need. You traded us for gold.”

“I did it for you! For the temple! I heard your wife admit she was a witch. You said she used Fianrath lust spells on you.”

Bryan bared his teeth. “What a fool I was to trust a man who charges for votive candles.”

“Bryan,” called Forak. “The others are rising again.”

“I saved you, Bryan,” Cregan pleaded. “She was tempting you from the—”

He sputtered as Bryan’s fingers squeezed his throat.

“There is no time for vengeance, son-in-law,” said Taurynne. “We must find Synne!”

Bryan shoved Cregan into the rising paladins, then stepped toward the door. “Yes, let us go.”

But as they jogged down the unfinished hallway

toward the yard, Bryan slowed when he saw a framing mattock lying among other construction tools. He picked it up.

“You three go ahead. I will join you.”

The others hurried on as Bryan lifted the great stone-headed hammer to his shoulder and stepped to a support pillar.

Cregan and the paladins were just pushing out of the kitchen. The smith stopped in his tracks.

“Bryan, no!”

“This for betraying Synne.” Bryan swung for the support post as the paladins squeezed around the smith. Splinters flew and the wood split. Beams above sagged and groaned.

“My house!” shouted Cregan. “Stop him!”

The paladins rushed Bryan as he swung at a second post, then flinched back as it snapped in two. The groaning of the beams increased and Bryan leapt back. Then they split and the planks they held started to avalanche down. Cregan raised his arms with a cry as more and more of the second floor collapsed on him and the paladins.

Bryan turned and ran and burst into the yard just as the entire unfinished wing folded in on itself and collapsed in a heap. Soon there was nothing but dust and the groans of buried men.

“Enjoy your ill-gotten gold,” Bryan said.

He ran to the waiting turnip cart, hammer in hand, and rolled into the back.

“Eeyah,” Lwyd called to the horse and snapped the reins.

“Where now?” Forak urged as they clattered into the street.

“To the temple of the Swordfather,” Bryan said grimly. “If Garic took Synne, that’s where he will hold her.”

“Shepherd and Spring Wife protect my Synne,” Taurynne intoned, and Lwyd struck the horse’s flanks with the reins.

“Garic, what did you do to Synne?”

Nerian touched Synne’s chin where a dark bruise was forming, and she wrenched her face away.

They stood before the parted doors of the old keep, deep below the temple of the Swordfather. A circular entry chamber lay within, and directly across it stood another set of great doors. Synne had not known why Garic and his soldiers had brought her to this place until the high prefect emerged from the doors. Now she struggled in Garic’s grip.

“You can see the woman is difficult, your grace.”

Garic shook her until her brain rattled. “She broke my nose.”

“You’ve a heavy hand, captain. No doubt you deserve everything you have received.” Nerian crossed to the doors of the inner chamber. “Bring her into my sanctum.”

As the priest disappeared into his chamber, Synne clutched at Garic.

“No! Take me with you,” she urged. “Arrest me properly.”

Garic laughed. “I am your hero now that a greater villain appears? Sorry. I’ll not deny my master his fun.”

Enraged, she headbutted him in his already-swollen nose.

“Argh! You bitch!” He shook off the strike and dragged Synne across the entry chamber and through the inner doors.

The sanctum was another circular chamber, much bigger. Storage cloths covered mysterious furnishings surrounding a large round carpet decorated with the Swordfather’s sword, and a folding partition hid something against the far wall.

A sharp pain assailed Synne’s skull as Garic marched her to a table set for tea, and she searched the

room in bewilderment for the cause. Some pungent unseen foulness filled the place. Was it a Fatherite defensive spell? It seemed more hostile than protective.

Garic pushed her down into a chair.

She sprang up again. "I refuse to stay—"

Garic shoved her back down and slapped her, then swaggered to Nerian by the doors, his plate armor clanking.

"As you commanded, high prefect."

"In the Swordfather's name," said Nerian. "Let none enter this room."

Garic grinned. "His will be done." Exiting, he pulled the heavy doors shut behind him.

Nerian touched a plaque next to the doors, and it opened to reveal a hidden lever surrounded by symbols. Chanting low, he pulled it down with a clack. The sound of door bolts sliding and locking filled Synne with dread.

Her heart beating frantically, she searched the room for something to hit him or hurt him with. There were the table and chairs and two porcelain cups and the small serving pot of the tea set, but the furniture was too heavy and the tableware too light to be of much use. Beyond that everything was hidden, covered by the strange storage cloths. Were she her mother, of course, she would have already slipped a sleeping potion into Nerian's tea, and she cursed her lack of preparedness.

Nerian slowly crossed the room, fingers meditatively pressed together. He stared, as he'd always done in the marketplace, with that odd blankness that made her ill—one that did not recognize her face but only her shape, as if she were some object for his mind's entertainment.

Sitting down, he poured the tea, then moved the serving pot out of her reach.

Synne tensed.

"Won't you drink your tea?" His tone was silky. "This is a rare brew, said to be cultivated in far Sinae for the empress herself."

"Let me go," Synne said.

"You do not recognize your good fortune."

"You hold me captive."

"You cannot be that slow, can you? Perhaps it is true what they say of beauty."

"You dare?" Synne sputtered. Her nausea and anger rose. Once again, his ugly insinuations sickened her like they always had in the marketplace.

"You sit here with the high prefect of the temple. Don't you know how to placate those you serve?" His unfocused stare was directed below her neck. "In the market, you do not even know to sell . . . the right goods."

He reached across, touching his soft fingertips to hers.

Synne snatched her hand away. "You'll lose more than your hand if you speak such words to me again!"

Nerian smiled. "It's foolish to act the respectable woman of Caith when Fianrath witches are being used as kindling these days. You should try pleasing me. Don't you want to see your mother safe?"

Synne bit back the queries that nearly erupted. *Where is she? What have you done to her?*

"Of course you would," he continued. "What daughter wouldn't? The temple can show compassion, even to a Fianrath priestess. We could exile her to the lowlands." He reached again for her hand. "She would only suffer . . . a small branding, perhaps, to mark her as a witch. Sad, yes, but considering the alternative, it would be a mercy, don't you think?"

His eyes grew sharp. "Obey me and she shall have that mercy."

"Bryan will save her," Synne answered.

Nerian struck the tabletop, startling her.

"Bryan is our prisoner! Jailed and beaten for his crimes." His gaze turned sad. "My heart sorrows at his betrayal. He was raised by the church. How could he turn his back on it?"

He sighed, then smiled as his eyes traveled the length of Synne's body. "And yet, I forgive him, for I know how great the temptations were that he faced."

"Swine!"

Nerian held up a hand. "Now, now! He has begged me for release, and it is within my power to grant it, only . . . I can't be everywhere at once, Synne, now can I? Right now, his guards must be amusing themselves with him. You know how paladins can be when a former colleague betrays—"

"Liar!" Synne cried. "I don't believe you have him!"

Nerian sneered. "Would you like me to show you one of his fingers?"

Synne shoved away from the table and ran for the doors. She pressed the plaque and it opened, revealing the lever and the strange writing. She did not recognize the script, but the sight of it chilled her soul.

The lever was ice as she pulled up on it, and her fingers shook from the foul power surrounding it. It would not budge. She snatched her hand back and banged against the obstinate wood of the doors with both fists.

"Help!" she yelled. "Let me out!"

"You are alone," Nerian called from across the room. "And a woman. No one can help you. Make it easy on yourself and submit to me."

Synne rested her forehead on the door and took deep breaths, trying to think, trying not to sob.

"Submit to me." Nerian hissed, suddenly right behind her. His breath was in her hair. "Submit, or Bryan dies."

Synne spun around and struck him in the face. He grabbed her arm. She twisted and fought to break free.

"Get away from me!"

His hand snaked beneath her next punch and grabbed her chin. "I'll burn him, you bitch. I'll burn him unless—"

His hand slipped down to her throat and then to her chest. Fingers fumbled there, loosening the ties of her kirtle.

“Son of a pig,” Synne cried and hit him again.

Nerian tugged at her kirtle, licked his lips. “Come on, don’t fight me. Let me touch—”

She clawed at him and her fingers caught his collar. The fabric ripped, exposing his bare chest and revealing a black iron amulet, as big as a fist, its two broken halves soldered together by a mystical binding—the symbol of the Charn, worshipers of ancient alien gods, the Famhair.

Chapter Eight

“How shall we do this, Bryan?” asked Forak, as he, Bryan, Taurynne, and Lwyd reached the steps of the temple of the Swordfather.

Bryan paused. It seemed a lifetime ago he’d walked down those steps with Alain by his side—and since then . . .

His inner eye was enslaved to a repeating circle of memories—Garic in Synne’s garden, shoving Alain into his blade; Garic squeezing Synne’s throat with his armored hand; Garic laughing as he dragged Taurynne and Lwyd away.

Bryan drew his hood down over his blazing eyes.

“We will walk in,” he growled.

Before he could take a step, Forak stayed him, and Taurynne bumped into Bryan’s back.

“Ugh. Stay, go, make up your mind,” she muttered.

“Bryan, that one recognizes you,” Lwyd whispered.

Bryan looked up to find the young paladin, Dael, gazing down in surprise at the skulking party.

“You—y-you are no Fatherite.”

Synne stumbled back from Nerian and clutched at one of the hidden objects for support. The cloth that covered it fell away. A squat, toad-like statue was revealed. Its surface was crazed with cracks, and its one jeweled eye stared. The stench of dark magic wafted from it and assaulted Synne’s senses.

Snatching off another cloth, she revealed an old chained tome with the blurry, black tattoo of the Charn on a pale leather cover that reminded her of a man’s flayed skin. She ran and knocked down the folding partition. Behind it, a ceremonial dagger with a serpentine blade hung suspended over a Charn altar. Before she could grab it, Nerian blocked her with a slap of his hands on the altar top, and Synne jerked away.

“Do you not admire my toys, Synne?” Nerian smiled, all teeth. “Would you like to play with them?”

“Foul cultist,” she accused. “You seek the doom of all living kind.”

“I only serve my god as you serve yours. It’s just that mine has powers greater than any other on this puny plane.” He grabbed the edge of the round carpet with the symbol of the Swordfather in its center and hurled it aside. “The Famhair’s reward to me will be mastery over all of you. And a king needs a bride.”

Synne felt she might vomit. On the marble floor where the carpet had been were two giant Charn symbols, the names of their twin gods, Resh and Urshad, drawn within a circle crisscrossed with spell lines. Nerian suddenly stood before her.

“Intimacy,” he said through his teeth, “can awaken this circle.”

He grabbed for her waist. She shrieked and flailed, kicking at the evil design in an attempt to disrupt it. It was

painted to the floor.

Nerian pushed her to the ground. "You will be with me—"

Her knee jabbed his manhood beneath his robe. He screeched in pain and she shoved him away.

Hands behind his back, Bryan led the way down the stairwell to the temple's depths. Taurynne, Lwyd, and Forak followed, also hiding their hands, as the young paladin Dael walked the rear, ostensibly marching them to their doom. When they reached the old hall, Dael pushed the group toward the keep. Four paladins sat at a table with Garic and played a game of tiles.

Bryan paused at the sight of Garic. Was he awaiting more orders from Nerian? And who had broken his nose? He smiled to himself when he guessed the answer. Good for Synne, though that she had to fight at all made his blood boil. If Garic had hurt her . . .

Garic donned his red-plumed helm, then stepped in front of the great doors, his plated legs wide and his gleaming codpiece prominent. He eyed the approaching group with a grin.

Dael shoved Bryan toward the Fatherite captain.

"Captain Garic," Dael loudly announced. "I bring you the traitor and his comrades."

Garic leaned in and stared into Bryan's face. "Did you really think this ruse would work?"

Bryan swung his sledgehammer from under his cloak, but Garic danced back, laughing.

"Where is my wife?" Bryan cried.

Garic drew his sword as the other three paladins rose from their table and closed in. He smirked. "With Nerian, idiot."

Bryan's blood froze. The words Synne had spoken only a day ago echoed in his mind. *Believe me when I say*

that priest has an unpriestly gaze.

“Synne,” he bellowed, and swung for Garic’s head.

“Synnel!”

The shout was muffled by the doors of the inner and outer chambers, but she heard it.

“Bryan!” Synne kicked Nerian in the midsection, and then in the head, hoping he would stay down. “I knew you hadn’t taken him!”

She stumbled for the doors and the warded lever, then gritted her teeth and grabbed for it.

“Weaver’s scissors, Spinner’s teeth,” she incanted. “Spring Wife’s knife, Winter Wife’s sickle. Cut the killer’s web.”

The air snapped like a thunderclap, stinging her shaking hand. She held tight and threw the lever up. A second thunderclap shook the doors and she flew back.

Bryan struck Garic’s helm a glancing blow and sent him reeling as the other paladins charged in and roared for reinforcements. Forak drove back the first with his scimitar, and Dael the second with her sword. Lwyd ducked a swipe from the third and punched his knee sideways, dropping him to the floor. Taurynne rushed for the keep’s outer doors and tried to turn the wheel that locked them. She couldn’t move it.

Bryan looked around as more paladins spilled out of a doorway on the left wall.

“Lwyd, help Taurynne open the door!” he shouted, as he, Dael, and Forak swiveled to face their new foes.

“Aye!” Lwyd punched his paladin in the groin, then ran to the struggling Taurynne. “Here. It turns in this direction.”

With a mighty pull, he spun the wheel counterclockwise.

“Of course it spins widdershins,” Taurynne snarled. “As evil does. Son-in-law! This way!”

They threw open the doors and backed toward the opening, slashing at the encroaching paladins to keep them at bay.

“Stop them!” roared Garic as he regained his feet.

He raced forward as the friends backed through the doors and started pushing them closed.

“Push, you dogs!” shouted Garic. “Put your shoulders into it!”

The paladins slammed their shoulders into the door, but Bryan and his companions were winning the contest. The doors were slowly closing.

“Curse you, traitor!” snarled Garic, and punched at Bryan’s face through the gap.

Bryan flinched back from the spikes and lost his footing. The tide turned. The paladins shoved the doors open and poured into the antechamber with Garic at their fore as Bryan and the others fell back.

Garic slammed the doors closed and pulled down on a lever. Sliding bolts rumbled into place.

“Now you are trapped.”

He reached for a second lever and his men suddenly scurried to the walls of the room and flattened against them. Before Bryan and the others could comprehend the significance of this action, Garic pulled the other lever.

“And now you are dead.”

With a grinding of stone on stone, the floor tilted down beneath the feet of Bryan and his companions.

Chapter Nine

Bryan scrambled for purchase as he slid down the stone slab that had once been the floor, then caught a crack with one hand, halting his fall into the pit below. It was a tenuous hold at best, but he gripped it for all he was worth, then reached with his hammer, trying to hook the head of it over the top of the slab. He looked around.

To his left, Dael teetered at the edge, then shrieked and lost her footing and tumbled past Bryan into the darkness. To his right, Forak clung desperately to the top edge of the slab, while Lwyd clung to his legs. The dwarf scrambled up the captain's body to safety, then hauled him up as two paladins edged around the pit toward them with swords drawn. Above him . . .

“Son-in-law, watch out!”

Bryan looked up just in time to take Taurynne's foot in his face as she slid down the steep incline.

“Gurg,” Bryan said.

Garic appeared above them, gloating. “Synne won't

be a sullied woman if she's made a widow, am I right, Bryan?"

With a tremendous effort Bryan raised his other hand and flung his hammer at Garic. The captain jerked back, more from surprise than the force of the blow, and lost his footing.

"You son of a—"

Down he came, hammer tumbling after, and knocking Bryan and Taurynne loose as he plummeted into the pit.

Synne stirred woozily, her head aching. How long had she been unconscious?

The doors! She needed to open them for Bryan!

She rose shakily to her feet, then looked around as a sharp clatter echoed in the chamber. Nerian, groggy and unsteady, had knocked over the Charn altar as he grabbed the ceremonial knife. Now he raised it high, and with a wild cry, charged for her.

Synne dodged the slashing blade, but Nerian caught her by the hair and flung her down in the center of the spell circle. Before she could scramble up, he straddled her and snatched her wrist.

"It seems I must now resort to quicker means." With gritted teeth, he wrested Synne's fingers open and pressed the blade to her palm.

"Beware!" Taurynne shouted as she climbed to her feet. "Do not step on the Charn sigils!"

Charn sigils? Bryan staggered up and glanced down. The pit's floor was aglow with giant red symbols. Why were they here, in a temple of the Swordfather?

Garic did not give him time to work out the answer.

He pushed to his feet with a curse and kicked at Dael, who lay where she had fallen but was nonetheless trying to stop him.

“Bryan!” Dael cried, trying to rise. “Defend yourself!”

Garic strode toward Bryan and stepped on a Charn sign that erupted into red light beneath him.

A hail of iron-headed bolts burst from the darkness. Garic stumbled as they smashed into his armor, but kept on, unharmed.

Dael, however, was not so fortunate. She sank back, a bolt through her temple, another through her neck.

“Initiate!” cried Bryan.

Garic sneered as he edged closer. “So die all traitors.”

Pain seared Synne’s hand as her blood dripped to the floor, striking the sign of Resh while Nerian chanted and used her oozing palm to smear his chest and amulet with blood. Synne snatched her arm back and tried to buck him off. Nerian only swayed and raised his arms, his wild chanting unbroken. The cracked Charn amulet on his chest glowed red.

Beneath Synne, smokelike tendrils rose from the floor and snaked around her. They stroked and sought to unfold the fingers of her clenched fist. Their every touch nauseated her, making her stomach and head roil with dark and sickening sensations.

“Captain! I am coming!”

A paladin slid down into the pit and landed awkwardly at Garic’s side.

“At your command, sir.”

“Then go get them!”

Garic shoved the boy forward and charged, sword waving, as Bryan backed away with Taurynne behind him.

“Fool!” cried Taurynne, pointing to the paladin’s feet. “Watch where you step!”

The boy froze as an angry red light erupted from the symbol he stood upon. A crack appeared in his plated foot, and like the passage of a crooked knife, it traveled up his leg, splitting both flesh and armor like an exploding sausage and spraying his blood everywhere. He cried out and grabbed Bryan’s gambeson as his breastplate split and spouted like a blood fountain. The red crack raced down the man’s arm toward Bryan’s chest.

Bryan yelled and pulled away, but to no avail. The crack reached his gambeson and exploded it in a mass of shredded stuffing.

As the paladin collapsed in pieces at his feet, Bryan blinked through the falling fluff, his heart wildly pounding. Where was his own spurting blood?

“How . . . ?” he asked.

“The protection charm Synne sewed into your gambeson, son-in-law,” Taurynne said shakily.

Synne! She had saved his life. Now he had to save hers.

Bryan grabbed Taurynne and heaved her up to the tilted slab as Garic started for them.

“Mother, can you climb out?”

She found a crack in the tiling and reached for another. “I’ll manage, son-in-law. I—look out!”

Bryan twisted away just as Garic swung the sword. It sang through the air and struck the floor by his feet.

“Get me out of here, you clowns!” Garic shouted to the men above. He drove Bryan back with another slash, then sheathed his sword and leapt for the slab himself, pulling himself up after Taurynne.

“Pull the lever,” he yelled. Bryan grabbed Garic’s boot and hung on.

“Damned dog,” Garic grated, kicking at Bryan.

“Captain!” A paladin broke from the fight with Lwyd and Forak and reached down. Garic grasped his hand and tugged. The paladin fell and crashed into Garic, knocking him and Bryan back into the pit in a clattering of armor.

“Idiot,” Garic sputtered.

The soldier rose to his feet, groaning, then suddenly shuddered, frozen to the Charn sign he’d stepped on. Black ice engulfed his plated boots and climbed his legs. When it reached his chest, he filled the chamber with bloodcurdling screams.

Bryan swept up his hammer and ran around the stricken man. Garic drew his sword and brought it down with a roar. Bryan ducked, and Garic struck the iced paladin instead, shattering the frozen body into bloody clumps.

Kicking Bryan to the floor, Garic sheathed his sword and grabbed the edge of the tilted slab.

“The lever!” he shouted as he started to climb. “The lever!”

A paladin turned from his fight with Forak and reached for the lever and pulled it. The slab rumbled and started to rise.

Bryan threw his sledgehammer up to the floor above, then leapt after Garic and caught the stone edge just before it lifted out of reach. He pulled himself up, desperately trying to get his legs clear before the closing slab severed them.

Synne crawled from the circle and out of reach of the whispery touches, clutching her bleeding fist to herself, but she was too late. She had already bled too much. Nerian completed smearing the bloody sign of Resh on his chest, and ebony fire erupted from the circle’s center to leap

toward the sanctum's domed ceiling.

In the eye of the black flames, a shadow-hand cracked through the floor and surged up at the end of a sinewy arm. Another hand and arm followed, then a head.

Ice seized Synne's soul and a scream erupted from her throat. Within the ebony fire's heart, a pitch-black gaze found hers.

Garic staggered to his feet as the slab boomed closed, and Bryan had to roll aside as the captain drew his sword and slashed down at him. Across the room, Forak felled another paladin with his scimitar, then turned to face the last. Behind him, Lwyd lay wounded and exhausted beside Taurynne.

Bryan stood and freed himself of his shredded gambeson, leaving him in only his linen undershirt. Finding his hammer, he faced Garic. "Out of my way."

Garic grinned, all teeth, and held out his sword, admiring the stained tip. "Look here, murderer. Is that not Alain's blood on your blessed blade?"

Bryan swallowed bile. Garic had been wielding his own weapon against him, the sword that had killed Alain. The temptation to draw Alain's blade and run Garic through was almost unconquerable, but a vow was a vow. He raised his hammer instead.

Garic chuckled as he attacked. "Your wife tried so hard to keep your sword from me."

Bryan easily blocked the blow with his hammer and shoved the bigger man back. "Your taunts fall as clumsily as your blows, Garic. You're a woodchopper, not a swordsman."

"Yet I have your sword," Garic taunted, slashing again. "While you're the one who fights with a tradesman's weapon."

"The Swordfather's strength lies not in my sword

but in my heart.”

“Oh, shut up, you altar kisser.” Garic charged in, roaring and raining strike after strike.

“Bloodthirsty animal.” Bryan blocked each blow, then swung hard, but Garic swerved aside, and the hammer rang on the floor.

Garic kicked Bryan between the legs, and black spots burst behind his eyes. His legs lost strength.

Garic smashed his pommel into Bryan’s back, flattening him to the floor. Twisting, Bryan snatched at Garic’s ankle, but the captain lifted his foot and stomped on Bryan’s hand, then raked the spur along his forearm.

The sharp teeth caught on cloth and dug in. Blood ran from the gashed Fatherite tattoos on Bryan’s arm. He rolled aside and collided with the paladin Forak had slain.

“You were never hard enough to be a Fatherite,” Garic snarled. “You were too soft on the heathens. Indeed, you married one—became one.” He drew the sword back. “And a heathen needs putting down.”

Garic slashed down. Bryan tried to twist aside, but his head was still swimming. The blade struck him in the chest, and bright light flashed.

Bryan stared down in surprise. Blood bloomed diagonally from a shallow slice across his chest and stained the white linen—a wound he knew should have sunk deeper.

Another charm on my shirt, he thought. Synne had saved him again.

“You and your witch,” Garic spat. He drove the blade forward.

Bryan rolled the dead paladin up on top of him. The sword’s point sank into the paladin’s chest and nearly went clean through. Bryan shoved the corpse aside and Garic stumbled after it, the sword stuck between the dead paladin’s ribs.

Bryan suddenly saw his opportunity to avenge Alain and destroy that which had killed him at the same

time. Though he had Alain's sword at his side, it had been Bryan's sword that had killed him. And since Garic was wielding that sword now, he could destroy both with one blow.

Bryan surged to his feet and swung his hammer at the trapped blade. With a resounding clang, it shattered into shards and released the volatile power of its Fatherite blessing.

The erupting energy slammed Bryan against a nearby wall, then dropped him to the floor. Garic was thrown across the room, somersaulting end over end before landing on his neck with a loud crack. The broken sword's hilt spun from his slack hand.

"Captain!" cried the last paladin.

He tried to push past Forak to run to Garic's side. Forak cut him down with a backhand. The battle was over.

When he could breathe again, Bryan pushed himself to his feet and staggered to Garic, with Taurynne and Lwyd trailing him. The Fatherite captain stared up at them, his head twisted at a horrific angle, but still somehow alive—barely.

"Mercy," he rasped. "Fetch a priest. I must be healed."

Bryan set down his hammer and drew Alain's sword. Now was the moment. Now it was right.

"For Alain," Bryan said, and thrust the sword through Garic's heart. Then he bowed his head. "It is done, my friend."

Taurynne put a hand on his arm. "Mourn the dead later, son-in-law. Synne still lives, and she needs us, now."

Bryan nodded and ran to the doors of the inner sanctum with Forak at his side. They took hold of the handles as Taurynne and Lwyd followed behind.

"Beware," said Taurynne. "That stench is of Charn summoning magic!"

As Bryan and Forak cracked the doors open and stepped in, swords at the ready, an eerie wailing assaulted

their ears and a fiendish blue light attacked their eyes. Nerian faced away from them in the center of the room, raising his arms before a dancing black fire. Shadowy limbs undulated in flames, rising from a spell circle.

“Bryan!” Synne was pressed to a wall, tying a torn piece of her chemise around her bloodied hand. “Watch ou—”

A monstrous, man-shaped shadow dropped from the ceiling before Bryan, its sinewy muscles trembling. The pitch-black head flipped rapidly from side to side as if caught in a nightmarish seizure. Bryan froze, then stepped back.

A hole tore open in the shadow’s face, and it screamed blue fire.

Chapter Ten

The shadow's fire struck Bryan in the chest and threw him into the chamber doors. His skin screamed. His mind writhed.

"No!" cried Forak, and charged forward, slashing at the thing. His scimitar slipped through its oily blackness like wind through smoke. The blue hole in the twitching face gaped once more. Its chilling scream sent Forak tumbling.

"Beast of the Ifreann! Back to the demon world you came from," Taurynne cried, raising her hands. A Fianrath chant rose from deep within her chest, and the shadow creature cringed.

Nerian turned from his summoning and charged her, tackling her and knocking her to the floor.

"Mother," Synne gasped. She turned to Bryan. "Husband! Don't let the beast touch you!"

The creature lunged, its two arms ripping into four, as Bryan swung Alain's sword. Like Forak's scimitar, it

swished harmlessly through the amorphous body while the thing's finger tendrils sank into his shoulders and sides.

Clutching Bryan to its body, it shot off the ground like a startled crow and slammed him into the masonry halfway up the wall. All the air was knocked from Bryan's lungs and Alain's sword flew from his fingers. The demon leapt again and smashed him into the opposite side of the chamber, even closer to the ceiling, then again, each time crushing his body and shredding his clothes and skin.

Nerian laughed up at him, turning this way and that to follow his swift trajectory. "Where is your Swordfather now, Bryan? The Famhair will ride him like their dark servant now rides—"

He ducked and yelped as Forak's blade slashed for him.

"Stand still, priest!" cried Forak, and swept a foot for Nerian's leg.

The priest danced effortlessly away. Forak spun after, scimitar flashing, and struck a Charn statue with a jeweled eye, shattering it.

"Killing Nerian won't close the circle's portal, Forak," Synne cried. "It was my blood that opened it!"

"Y-yes," Taurynne said, pointing woozily. "N-never mind the pretend wizard. Disrupt the circle before more crawl through!"

Lwyd was carrying the hammer Bryan had dropped. He raised it. "I'll try."

He slammed the hammer down on the marble floor where the design was painted. An oily shadow-arm pulled free of the black fire and swiped at him. He dodged back and tried again.

Above them, Bryan struggled in the demon's clutches as the room whirled crazily around him. A glimpse of Synne crawling toward Taurynne, a glimpse of Forak chasing Nerian, a glimpse of the fiery maw of the summoning circle and the shadow-limbs squirming within it like worms. But it was hard to focus on any of it as the

ice seared his flesh where the creature clutched him and the stone tore his back.

Then the demon plunged headfirst toward the floor, apparently meaning to bash his brains out. In a panic, Bryan threw his legs over and down and flipped out of its grasp at the last second.

His soles slammed down at the spell circle's edge, then he sat down hard in it as the creature caromed away from him again. Black fire licked Bryan's backside and unseen hands clutched at him, holding him in place.

The creature arced up, then banked and swooped down at him again. He couldn't move.

"Bryan!" Forak dove in front of him at the last second and deflected the creature, but was smashed to the floor by the force of its dive. He lay motionless as it rose again.

"No!" Bryan tore free of the clutching hands, which came away with his bloodied undershirt. He crawled to Forak.

"Forak!"

The captain's eyes opened, then widened. "Behind!"

Bryan rolled aside and the demon's claws missed him by a finger's breadth. He stood and looked up at it. It clung to the wall with inky limbs. It screamed down from two mouths, and Bryan thumped his tattooed chest and roared back. The creature leapt for him.

Synne stared as her husband stumbled into view beyond the black fire, entirely embraced by his shadow-foe.

"Mother! How do we help him?"

"Sing with me!" Taurynne urged. "Repeat my words. We'll bind the—"

Nerian slammed his tattooed tome into Taurynne's face, then clipped Synne's temple with a backhand. Mother and daughter fell as the priest kicked Forak in the head and

ran on.

“Mother,” Synne gasped. “Captain Forak!”

How was one to grapple with a foe that was only half present, with one amorphous foot in the world of flesh and blood, while the other dwelled in the demon realm? It seemed impossible! Every place Bryan gripped the creature, it became shadow. Every place it gripped him, it was iron.

Perhaps he could throw it into the black fire. But no. Its body became mist when he clutched it, and its head tore open into one giant maw that swallowed Bryan’s head.

Bryan’s senses choked in a black tornado of ice, his brain turned to glass. With eyes that seemed turned in on themselves, he viewed the insides of his own skull and saw the sign of the Swordfather blazing there.

My skull tattoo, he thought.

The creature seemed to taste it as Bryan saw it, and it gagged, then vomited out his head. Bryan tried to take a breath but the thing started slapping him with four frenzied arms, each blow like pelting shards of ice, as it shrieked and writhed in his arms.

I’ve hurt it?

Through the tornado of the creature’s blurring attacks, Bryan could see the Fatherite tattoos on his corded arms glowing. Light shone from his chest too, and the Fatherite sign incised there. The shadow demon pummeled his face.

Taurynne’s words came back to him. *The strength of your heart is your faith, and you have a very strong heart.*

I have . . . power?

The revelation rang within Bryan like the truth of home, of sword—and of Synne.

“Hail Swordfather, Warrior and Wise,” he invoked, sputtering blood. “Hail Blessed Lady, the Reborn and the

Light.”

His tattoos glowed brighter. The demon screamed.

“Hail He and She, who are our might,” Bryan bellowed. “We are the Sword, the Spear, and the Arrowhead. We are the Helm, the Shield, and the Breastplate—”

The creature writhed in his searing embrace. Shadow fists pounded him like ice blocks as he chanted. Bryan squeezed harder. His own magic—Fatherite magic—was a sun’s power emanating from his heart. He was killing the demon! He was winning!

Through the shadow beast’s howling, he heard Nerian taunt Taurynne.

“Fianrath witches, you are no better than whores!”

Rage interrupted Bryan’s words of prayer.

“I will take your tongue, priest of lies,” Bryan roared.

The shadow beast surged in his arms.

“Mother!” Synne nearly wept as her mother’s eyes fluttered open.

Beside her, Forak remained unconscious.

Lwyd struck again at the floor with the hammer. It rebounded off the marble without leaving a scratch. “I can’t break it. How do we end this?”

“I know not,” Taurynne called hoarsely. “Synne’s blood opened the portal, but it is still fueled, and not by that false one! He is weak, else he would not use a Fianrath woman’s blood.”

“I would have taken more of the harlot’s sweetness if not for your interruption,” Nerian crowed, then danced toward Bryan and the demon.

“He is weak,” Synne repeated, then let go of Taurynne as a thought came to her. “*He* is weak—”

She stood and broke into a run for Nerian.

“You’re still praying, Bryan?” Nerian sneered as he batted at him with his tome. “Is your pretend Swordfather answering? Will that weak bitch called the Blessed Lady come save—”

He turned and yelped as Synne tore the Charn amulet from his neck and ran on.

The amulet’s black iron burned Synne’s bandaged hand like she’d plunged her fingers into a frozen lake. She threw the awful thing to the floor in front of Lwyd.

“Lwyd! Strike it! Hurry!”

“Horde of Resh and Urshad crush you,” Nerian screeched, and raced to pick it up.

Lwyd lifted the hammer high as Synne and Taurynne recited a Fianrath rhyme.

“Spinster find the crack, Wrecker sink the wrack.”

As the stone head of the hammer struck it, the amulet erupted, flinging the women and the dwarf back and knocking Nerian flat. Unearthly voices howled in the echoing chamber. The black fire sucked down into the floor and took the demonic ghost-limbs with it. In a blink, nothing remained but the spell circle, its Charn symbols scrambled, and the marble cracked at last.

“Arrr!” Bryan roared.

In his straining arms, the demon, trapped in the physical world by his shining tattoos, had solidified. Sinewy pitch-black muscles flexed as the demon screamed back. With its four limbs, it broke apart Bryan’s hold. One clawed hand dug into Bryan’s side.

“Bryan,” Synne uttered, hurrying for him.

Nerian staggered up before her, dagger raised. “Interfering whore!”

Taurynne’s red hair filled Synne’s vision as her mother leapt in front of her. The blade struck home and Taurynne shuddered.

“Mother!” Synne cried.

Prancing away, Nerian crowed, his bloodied dagger held triumphantly aloft as Synne lowered Taurynne to the

ground. A glass ball rolled from Taurynne's hand. She fell back into Synne's arms.

"Poisoned," Taurynne gasped.

Bryan bellowed as the demon's fingers dug deep into his side, then he sunk his own fingers into its now-solid flesh.

"Fiend! Now feel the Swordfather's hands!"

Bryan lifted the creature high into the air, then brought its spine down hard on his knee. Bone snapped, and the demon's screeches deafened him. Its spastic limbs blurred as they pounded his head and shoulders. Bryan spat blood and twisted its head until its neck snapped and its tendons tore, then he threw the demon to the floor, and, with a foot on its neck, pulled on its head until it ripped free.

The flailing limbs dropped, slack, and Bryan felt death lighten the body beneath him.

"Corrupt one." He rose unsteadily from the corpse and turned toward Nerian. "You are next."

"Man-beast!" Nerian laughed. "You cannot stop my gods. My time as master has come. I—"

Chock!

Nerian's head bounced on the stone floor, and dark blood spewed from his headless neck. Forak stood behind him, scimitar dripping.

Bryan fell to his knees and pressed a palm against his gouged side.

"My thanks . . . Forak," he said.

The captain nodded wearily. "Anytime, my friend."

With the noise of the fire and the demon's shrieking gone, they could hear paladins shouting and pounding on the antechamber's doors. The wood was splintering. They would be through any moment, and the doors to the sanctum were open.

Forak staggered to them and shut them, then shoved the iron shaft of a lamp through the handles.

“Worry not, there is another way out,” Lwyd assured everyone, pointing to a far wall. “Humans think they’re clever makers, but they are as clumsy as infants to our stonemasons. Over there lies a secret door.”

Forak limped to where Lwyd pointed and touched along the stone. “I see it. A crack.” Grabbing the sconce, he turned it. Stone loudly scraped, and the wall receded and slid, revealing a narrow and darkened passageway.

Forak looked into the dark passage. “I’ve heard tales of Skara Brae below. This must be it. Let us hurry!”

“We cannot.” Synne gazed tearfully at her mother, and Bryan crawled to her. Taurynne’s eyes were shut in her deathly pale face.

“She is dying,” she said.

Chapter Eleven

Lwyd shook his head. “You are right. She will not survive the next few minutes.”

He looked up at Synne. “You must have learned some healing from her. Can you do anything?”

“Th-this sort of wound? A poisoning? I—I have never—” Synne sobbed.

“Please,” said Lwyd. “You must try. Think back. Remember the motions. Remember the words.”

The sanctum boomed with the sound of the entry chamber doors shattering.

“A battering ram,” Bryan said. “They’ll be here soon.”

Synne placed her hands over Taurynne’s wound. They shook, as did her voice as she tried to remember the healing verses.

“Nothing is happening,” she moaned.

“Concentrate,” Lwyd said. “Remember.”

Synne pressed hands to her mother’s face. “I-I am

forsaken. I've lost my gods. I should never have tried to worship both."

The ram struck the sanctum's doors. Bryan took her hands.

"Don't say that, beloved. In these last days, you and your mother have taught me that whether it is the Swordfather and the Blessed Lady, or the many gods of Caith, all gods exist and have power. You have proved to me that there is good and strength in all gods, and we should not deny their worship or their aid because they are not our own."

Synne looked up at him, wide-eyed.

He smiled, ignoring the pain of his bloodied lips. "Yes, I know. Only yesterday I condemned all magic, but your mother said our truth is also our strength." He kissed her bandaged hand. "This I now believe. Pray to your gods, and I shall pray to mine, and together we will save her. We will show her our truths."

Synne nodded, her eyes shining and wet. "If you will help me, I will try."

She laid hands on Taurynne once more, and once again began to pray.

As his wife's Fianrath words wove, Bryan pressed his hands to Synne's and silently called upon the Blessed Lady and the Swordfather, willing his strength into her song. After a moment, Lwyd's deep voice joined them in the dwarven tongue, and then Forak added the words of the Barabi.

For a long moment there was no change, then slowly Synne's hands began to glow. A warmth stirred the air like a westerly wind, while a blanket of light formed around Taurynne, swaddling her. Bryan nearly halted in mid-prayer, reveling in Synne's shining power, but managed to continue.

At last, a mystic fire erupted at Taurynne's side, and her eyes flew open. She abruptly sat up, exhaling poisonous black smoke, then coughed. The fire and light faded, and

Bryan felt the tingling of Synne's magic melt away. He swayed and held his bleeding side.

Synne clasped Taurynne to her. "Mother!"

"Well done, my girl," Taurynne wearily rasped. "I was waving hello to the Weaver when you called me back."

The metal of the sanctum doors bent with a loud boom and the timber splintered.

Bryan and the others stood and stepped back.

Another thunderous strike and the door fell off its hinges. Commander Thorne kicked through the wreckage with plated boots, sword drawn and helm gleaming. His paladins followed him in.

Bryan stepped forward, and Thorne pointed his sword.

"Stay where you are, savage," he bellowed.

"That is no savage, but one of your best men, Commander," Forak exclaimed.

Thorne stared aghast at Bryan's bloody, shirtless torso and his torn and bruised face. "Bryan? Can it be—?" His gaze then dropped to the headless body of Nerian. "In the Swordfather's name, is that our high prefect?"

"Nerian was not the man we knew, Commander," said Bryan. "Look about you. His chamber was filled with devices and books sacred to the cult of the Charn. It was their gods he worshipped, not the Swordfather, and enslaved by this evil, he kidnapped my wife and used her blood to summon that demon there, which I slew."

"Nerian, corrupted?" Thorne turned from the twisted demon corpse to Bryan. "No, I refuse to believe it. It must have been these Fianrath witches who summoned this vile creature, and who magicked these foul artifacts here. Are they not your kin? Did you assist them in this assassination? And the murder of good Garic too? The blood on your hands suggests you did!"

Fury swelled in Bryan and he felt like he was containing thunder. Thorne and his paladins stepped back at the sight of him. Was Thorne being a fool, like Bryan himself had been? Or was he corrupt like Garic?

"I do not deny I fought Garic," Bryan growled. "But Garic was in league with Nerian, and Nerian—"

"Was the wisest and most pious of us all, and you will accuse his pure soul no further!" Thorne shouted. "You, who stand there flanked by your witch women, a—sub-human, and a foreigner? It is clear who has betrayed the Swordfather." Through clenched teeth, Thorne gave his order. "Paladins, arrest these assassins!"

Taurynne tossed a glass ball into the air. "Eight foes, blinded."

The ball burst over Thorne's head in a twinkling of glass. A light, sparkling rain, brief as dust, fell upon him and his paladins. When they blinked the rain away, the soldiers looked about in confusion.

"Where—?" Thorne uttered, his gaze passing over Bryan and his comrades.

Stone suddenly scraped, and the commander spun for the cause.

"What was that?"

Lwyd stood by the reopened passageway and gestured urgently to his companions. Forak leapt forward and Lwyd handed him the torch that hung just inside the passage. Taurynne, seeming fully recovered, lifted her skirts and scurried after.

"Witchcraft! Find them!" Thorne cried. "Search! They must still be here, somehow!"

Synne took Bryan's arm. "Come, husband."

"Wait," he said, and looked around.

"What? We cannot wait!"

Finally he saw what he was looking for—Alain's sword, which he had dropped when the demon had slammed him against the wall. He stepped to it and picked it up, then sheathed it as Synne grabbed his arm. He went

with her into the passageway and the stone wall slid shut behind them.

Forak lit the torch with flint and steel, then led the way, and Lwyd and Taurynne's shadows bounced along the wall as they hurried after him. After fighting so hard for so long, Bryan found the flickering mesmerizing. Even as he put one foot before the other, his eyelids and body turned to lead. He leaned against Synne and pressed his hand against his wounded side. Blood seeped through his fingers, warm and slick. Then he tripped.

Must not fall on Synne, he thought.

Synne shouted distantly.

He knew nothing after.

Bryan heard voices, whispers. He was lying on his back, and whatever he lay on was moving—a ship, perhaps, or a wagon. His wounded side ached, and it felt like someone was prodding it. He clenched his fist instinctively and prepared for a fight.

When he managed to raise one eyelid, the night's starry canopy met his gaze. He breathed in. The wind bore the fresh scents of grass and earth. No smoke, no dung, no small city sounds. The stillness was disturbed only by creaking wheels, a horse's hooves, and insects singing in the darkness.

He shifted his eyes and saw Synne and Taurynne kneeling beside him inside the cart, both peering at his torso by the light of a tiny candle.

"I tell you, that giant spider did us a favor," said Taurynne. "It might have been the size of a hut, but its webbing staunched his bleeding as well as any bandage."

"Too bad it fell into that crevasse when you slew it, Forak," said Lwyd somewhere beyond Bryan's vision. "Spider meat makes a good stew."

"So there are tasty spiders in the holds of Folaithe?"

came Forak's voice.

I am dreaming, Bryan thought. Then another hand touched him.

"Good work, daughter," said Taurynne. "It all heals cleanly. But what of this?" Taurynne grasped him below like a farmer appraising a stud's valuables, and Bryan yelped. "You did not see how that cowardly Fatherite brute kicked him."

"Bryan, are you awake? You should have said something," Synne scolded. "Mother, help me with his belt."

"Er," Bryan said. The heat of embarrassment flushed his cheeks, but before he could speak, Taurynne and Synne began to sing, low and soothing, while they continued to work on his injuries. Their voices wove, sweet yet also electric, as, invisible yet familiar, their Fianrath blessings sank into his flesh and aching bones.

Woman's magic, he thought.

His neck protested as he tried to look around. Synne held his face and inspected his eyes—one open, the other puffed closed. Bryan smiled, then winced as his lip cracked with pain.

"Here, daughter. Let me see if the blows he stopped with his face have addled his brains." The candle flickered into his vision while Synne's fingers pried open his good eye.

Taurynne peered at him over Synne's shoulder. "He does not appear to be any more a simpleton than he already is. We will know when he tries to speak."

"I would not worry. Bryan has a skull as hard as a helm," Forak said.

"Let us hope the same for his brains." Taurynne sat back. "Ugh, son-in-law. Your face is a fright. May your children favor my Synne's beauty."

As if to emphasize the blessing—if Bryan could call it that—Taurynne splashed his face with scented water.

"Glarch," he sputtered.

“Mother! Leave him be.”

“Are . . . we safe?” Bryan finally said.

“You slept in a wheelbarrow while we traveled Skara Brae’s Below,” Forak called from the driver’s seat. “We have since left the city behind.”

“Once we are among my folk, we’ll need to clothe him.” Taurynne sniffed. “His savage state will only attract attention. He also would do well to add Fianrath protection tattoos to his Fatherite ones.”

Bryan’s mouth dropped open to protest, but Synne spoke first.

“We will fashion a leather coat for him, as protective as any paladin’s gambeson, and well charmed.”

“And I shall make you a breastplate and vambraces,” Lwyd called from his seat beside Forak. “Stronger than any human-made armor, and blessed by the fire songs of Gaufain.”

Gratitude warred with amusement in Bryan’s heart, and he didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. A Fatherite paladin wearing a Fianrath-warded leather jack, and armor made with dwarven forge magic? Only a day ago he would have arrested the makers of both such garments.

“Say ‘thank you,’ Bryan,” Synne said.

“Thank you, Lwyd.” Bryan’s voice quavered. “But I do not feel worthy of such gifts. I have failed you and the people of Skara Brae by serving false masters. I am no longer worthy of my position.” He shut his eyes. “Perhaps I was never worthy.”

Synne rested her hand on the hilt of Alain’s sword, which lay beside Bryan on the floor of the cart. “Were Alain here, Bryan, what would he say to such words?”

Bryan smiled ruefully. Alain would not have indulged Bryan’s self-pity. “He would have laughed at me.”

“You are a swordsman, Bryan,” Forak called. “Your heart lives for service. Think, man! You do not have to serve the temple to serve the Swordfather. Stand now for your god, for you need no priest to be his. Do not lone

paladins roam, paid not by a temple, but by a people's gratitude? A man like you is what your Swordfather needs."

Bryan nodded. Those thoughts had been stirring in his most secret of hearts for a long time. But until now he hadn't dared acknowledge them.

"The Swordfather speaks through you, good Forak," he said, and his heart seemed to swell in size, as if released from a binding. "I hear and obey."

Chapter Twelve

A powerful scent, not foul but too fresh for human lungs, filled Bryan's nostrils. He abruptly sat up, awake, with every healing wound—big and small—protesting. It was night still, and Synne was struggling to get his bulk out of the cart.

Taurynne stood in the grass and capped a tiny bottle. She hid it in her clothing. "That should give him strength to walk a league or two. On your feet, son-in-law."

She patted his shoulder in encouragement as his boots hit the ground.

Gritting his teeth, Bryan rose to his full height, then clutched Synne's shoulder and walked with her through the high grass. Below, a river glistened in the dark, and two shadowed figures, one lanky and tall with long braids and the other short and stout, stood with a third holding a bargeman's pole.

"A smuggler," Synne said, her voice low. "He'll take us to the coast."

Bryan nodded. "We sail with Forak?"

"No," Taurynne said behind him, and her tone was smug. "We three will travel on to those parts of Caith where Fatherite paladins dare not tread."

"Mother, take his other side."

"Let the man walk. It is good for him. I will help by prodding him along with this stick."

Bryan needed no prodding, for he wished them safely away. The smuggler's flatboat possessed no seats, so he lay in the stern and Synne joined him. Lwyd sat at the tiller, with Taurynne beside him. Once all were settled, Forak and the smuggler took standing positions at the fore and pushed off with their poles. They punted powerfully and the banks of long grass passed swiftly as the boat knifed through water.

Mixing with the night's fresh air, Bryan smelled something else—as comforting and familiar as Synne. While his wife stared up at the stars, he lowered his chin to his chest and sniffed.

"I smell of cinnamon."

"Synne fashioned a cunning new healing spell using the spice of love," Taurynne said behind him, pride evident in her voice. "I will teach it to others."

Though his aching arms felt like stones, Bryan held Synne close and tucked her head beneath his chin. Silently, he gave thanks to the Blessed Lady.

"I have said such foolish, stupid things," he whispered to Synne.

"As I myself have often pointed out," Taurynne sniffed.

"Mother," Synne snapped in a low voice. She hugged Bryan. "My husband. I forgive you."

"I've hurt you," Bryan said. "Insulted you deeply, and for no reason but my own fanciful fears. No love spell was ever needed to capture me. I loved you the moment I saw you in the marketplace, and that love was entirely my own doing. I am the luckiest of men to have been chosen

by you.”

Synne pressed her lips to his bearded chin. “I am the most cunning of women to have chosen you, my brave Bryan.”

He grimaced. “Your brave Bryan may also be a very foolish Bryan, facing a demon and a Charn sorcerer with only his bare hands.”

“Oh, such foes are nothing compared to your strength. Do you know how I knew you’d defeat them?”

“How?” Bryan peered down at her.

She laid her hand over his beating heart. “This. You are what weak men like that villain priest can barely hope to be—a person of heart. You are strength itself.”

“It is not strength,” he protested. “It’s—”

“Your faith. I know.”

In the night’s darkness, Taurynne snorted.

Synne smiled at Bryan, a brilliance he wished to drown in. “Someday Mother will understand. You are the truest man, Bryan of Dorn.”

She kissed him.

The End