

Promises

made by

Moonlight



Mike Lee

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Chapter 1

Sybale, daughter of the desert moon, dreamt of the day she slew a god.

The dream began as it always did, in a tumult of noise, and blood, and choking dust. She lay among her fallen sisters, tangled in their torn limbs, with the surf-like roar of battle reverberating in her bones and the fierce heat of the midday sun like a red-hot brand against her upturned face.

There was pain, too, vague and dreamlike. Blood streamed from her torn scalp, running across her cheekbone and dripping into the hollow of her throat, the sensation strangely cold against her ebon skin.

At that moment, she was alone among the dead. The Akkalid battle-line had swept over her and her sisters in an avalanche of stabbing spears and heavy shields, and was now hammering at the beleaguered Barabi infantry some

fifty yards behind her. Outnumbered nearly ten to one, her people were wavering under the Akkalid onslaught.

The air was heavy with portent. It was bitter with spilled blood and a rising tide of despair. The momentum was with the Akkalids. In another few moments, the Barabi line would break, and a thousand years of civilization would come to an end.

Despair became desperation, then anger. Sybale struggled in the grip of her dead sisters. Then came the braying of war horns, and the ground beneath her trembled. The Akkalid heavy cavalry was on the move, readying itself for the final, crushing blow.

The enemy horsemen were advancing at a walk, forming into line less than fifty yards away. They were clad in coats of heavy steel plates that flashed balefully in the sun, and they carried cruel, iron-studded maces in their hands. They were the elite of the Akkalid army and the scourge of the civilized world. Ancient and noble kingdoms had been ground to dust beneath their hooves.

Yet they were nothing compared to the terrifying figure that rode before them, his face blazing like a hungry flame.

He rode a sacred white horse from the tribes of the deep desert, caparisoned in a coat of plates chased with burnished gold. His tunic was white samite, worn beneath an ornately worked breastplate and fine steel mail. A long, straight sword glinted in his hand as he rode back and forth along the growing line of cavalry, impatient for the slaughter to begin. When he turned to stare at the battle raging behind Sybale, the golden mask he wore flashed blindingly bright, forcing her to glance aside.

He was Ashurbal, King of the Akkalids, Consort of Baamut, the Undying Sun. A living god, come to conquer and enslave her people.

If she had stopped to consider what lay before her, Sybale might have been afraid. But there was no time to think; here, for a fleeting instant, was a chance to avenge

the deaths of her sisters and complete the task they had been sent to do. She staggered to her feet, head pounding. Her sword and shield were gone, lost in the melee, but an iron-tipped javelin jutted from the blood-soaked ground nearby.

The haft of the javelin settled comfortably into her calloused palm. She broke into a loping run, her head pounding nauseatingly with every step.

Near the center of the enemy battle-line Ashurbal had reined in his horse and turned half about, gesturing with his sword as he shouted to his troops. They responded with a lusty roar that caused the front rank of horses to toss their heads and stamp their hooves in anticipation.

They did not see her approach, a lone, brown-robed warrior veiled by clouds of swirling dust. Or perhaps they did, and did not care.

At thirty yards she cast the javelin, speeding it through the air with a feline scream of rage. The world seemed to tilt beneath her as she threw, pitching her face-first onto the ground.

Her eyes never left the iron-tipped shaft, flickering like a striking asp through the burning sky. It sped in a shallow, hissing arc, as perfectly aimed as if she'd cast it on the practice field.

At the last moment, several of the horsemen shouted in alarm. Ashurbal turned slightly in his saddle, as if guided by Fate herself. The javelin struck the curved surface of his breastplate at an angle and glanced aside, leaving a bright scar etched into the polished bronze.

The god-king reeled in the saddle, hauling desperately on the reins to try to keep himself upright. The gleaming mask turned this way and that, searching the battlefield for the source of the attack.

Its gaze settled on Sybale. She bared her teeth at the god-king in an agonized snarl.

Several of the cavalrymen spurred their horses forward, eager to answer her outrage against their master.

But Ashurbal halted them with an angry swipe of his blade. She could feel the god-king's furious stare beating down at her as he kicked at his horse's flanks. The pale steed leapt toward her, hooves pounding the dusty earth.

War horns wailed. The Akkalid cavalry began to move, following Ashurbal at a measured pace. Sybale felt the ground tremble beneath their tread and consigned herself to death. Pressing her palms to the scorching ground, she pushed herself upright.

Ashurbal was almost upon her. He leaned forward in the saddle, sword raised to deliver a killing blow. She felt no fear. Her mind was cold and clear, ready for the moment, as the priestesses had trained her to be.

The god-king was a poor horseman, hardly the equal of the fearsome warriors he led. As he loomed above Sybale he swung with all the strength he had, his body twisting in the saddle. At the same moment, Sybale leapt at him, grabbing for his sword arm.

The impact took her breath away despite the thick leather breastplate she wore, and would have flung her through the air like a rag doll had she not wrapped her muscular arms around his and held on with all her might. She heard the god-king bellow in surprise, and then she was falling, dragging Ashurbal with her.

They hit the ground together, tumbling through the dust. The next thing Sybale knew, she was rolling onto skinned knees and scrabbling forward through clouds of ochre dust. The thunder of hooves and the hungry cry of war horns sounded at her back.

The god-king of the Akkalids lay facedown just a few yards away. Sybale gripped his shoulder with both hands and heaved, rolling him onto his back. The sneering mask leered up at her. She could hear his tortured breaths reverberating behind its curved metal surface.

An ivory-hilted dagger was tucked into a sash at the god-king's waist. He fumbled for the weapon, but Sybale reached it first. With the last of her strength she tore the

blade from its scabbard and shoved it beneath the mask's golden chin.

Ashurbal thrashed and gurgled. Hot blood poured over her fist. She drew back her hand and stared in wonder.

Gods, it appeared, bled much like men.

The thunder of hooves engulfed her. Sybale raised her bloodstained fingers defiantly to the blazing sun. Then came the blow between her shoulders, pitching her forward into darkness.

Sybale woke with a start, one fist clenching the threadbare blanket beneath her chin and the other gripping the hilt of the borrowed knife at her side. Cold sweat dotted her brow. She shivered, taking deep breaths, and tried to calm her racing heart.

The air inside the narrow ship's cabin was cold and damp, tasting of sweat and spilled wine. Threads of pale light leaked through chinks in the cabin wall, faintly highlighting the edges of her cot and the sea chest at its foot. Over the tired creak of the ship's timbers she could hear the rush of wind and sea. Footsteps thumped across the deck beyond the cabin walls as the crew went about their work.

The horsehair mattress rustled as Sybale slipped her legs from beneath the blanket and sat up on the edge of the cot. One foot bumped the neck of an empty wine jug and sent it rolling across the shifting deck. She swallowed queasily, tasting bile in the back of her throat.

The ocean voyage had been a difficult one. When she'd come aboard the trading ship at Barabi, the captain, a shifty-eyed Einarr, took one look at her shaved scalp and spat an angry curse, his blunt fingers making warding signs against misfortune. Before he could summon his men and have her thrown back onto the quay, Sloane had intervened, drawing him aside for a whispered conversation. Coin had changed hands, and the captain had relented, but he

demanding she be confined to the cabin for the duration of the voyage, lest she alarm the rest of the crew. She'd spent the better part of a week in a space little bigger than a novitiate's cell back at the temple, alternating between fitful sleep and bouts of miserable seasickness and drinking the wine Sloane brought each evening. As she ate, he would pull a candle stub and one of his ancient, crumbling books from his scholar's bag. They would sit together in the darkness, poring over the pages. He taught her about the Charn, and whispered of glories to come.

Sybale heard footsteps outside the cabin. There was a short rap on the rough wood, and then the door swung open. Sloane stuck his head inside, his dark eyes peering into the gloom. He was tall and well built, handsome enough for a Baed, with a thick head of black hair and a close-cropped beard that highlighted a sharp nose and strong jaw line. Though he wore the garb of a simple merchant, it was clear to Sybale that he was as comfortable using the dirk at his belt as he was the scholar's bag at his shoulder. He was, she was learning, a man of a great many secrets.

Sloane studied Sybale from the doorway. "Did you sleep?" he asked. His deep voice had taken on a faint Baedish burr.

"Some," she answered thickly. "Better than yesterday." The deck tilted gently beneath her, sending the wine jug rolling into the far corner of the cabin.

"Still the same dreams?"

Sybale shifted uncomfortably. "The same." Dreams were the work of Bara, or so the priestesses had taught her. She'd been a fool to think the Einarr's cheap wine could keep them at bay. "I cannot fathom what they mean."

"It's just the past," Sloane said. "An old life, based on lies. It will fade in time." He smiled. "Come with me. There's something I want to show you."

Sybale frowned. "What about the crew?"

"Forget about them," he insisted. "You need to see

this.”

Reluctantly, Sybale reached for the battered pair of leather boots tucked underneath the bed. She was dressed like a Baed now, her lean frame hidden beneath a frayed woolen tunic and baggy trousers crosshatched in alternating lines of deep blue and bright green. Tucking her dagger into her belt, she pulled the blanket from the bed and wrapped it around her shoulders as she followed Sloane out onto the foredeck.

It was early morning. Sybale squinted in the wan sunlight that penetrated the clouds overhead. There was a following wind, and cold salt spray gusted against the back of her neck. It had grown steadily colder since leaving the sun-drenched shores of Barabi, and she had started to wonder if she would ever feel warm again.

The sea was the color of lead, rising and falling in broad, powerful swells. Sybale made her way carefully along the shifting deck, following Sloane forward to the ship’s broad bow. Three men waited there, leaning against the rail and speaking to one another in low voices. She recognized them at once: Guthric the Lestradae, a giant of a man with a baby face and a strangler’s hands; red-bearded Padraig, stout and ruddy-cheeked, with eyes like chips of flint; and Halvar, the sullen, scar-faced Einarr who always seemed to have a knife in his hand. They were Sloane’s chosen men, and members of the cult.

As am I, she reminded herself. It still felt strange, after a lifetime of service to Bara. But the goddess of the moon was lost to her now. Only the Charn offered her a path to revenge.

Padraig and Halvar slid apart as Sloane and Sybale approached, making room for them at the rail. The Einarr’s gaze was inscrutable, but Padraig studied her through swirling blue tendrils of pipe smoke and gave her a grudging nod. She returned the welcome with a wary glance and a nod of her own, one predator acknowledging another.

The trading ship stood at the entrance to a broad, shallow bay. The outlines of a large town emerged from the mists on the opposite shore. She spied a cluster of peaked towers rising above the crowd of steeply angled rooftops; a fortress of some kind, she reasoned, likely the seat of the local ruler.

“Skara Brae,” Sloane declared. He studied the distant town like a hungry wolf surveying a flock of sheep. “Your new home.”

Sybale frowned. Sloane had spoken of Skara Brae often during the voyage. Studying the distant skyline, it seemed like a dour, dismal place compared to Sennar. She steeled herself, thinking of all that she had left behind, and breathed deeply of the cold salt air. *I’m coming back for you, Damia. I swear it.*

“Let’s get to work,” she said.

Chapter 2

The triumphal procession stretched for more than a mile, winding its way through The Golden City of Sennar along the Avenue of Kings. Thousands had turned out to celebrate the army's return, lining the ancient thoroughfare and throwing handfuls of red and white rose petals into the air. Musicians stood at every street corner, adding the joyful notes of drum, flute, and cymbal to the din. Children capered alongside the marching spearmen, brandishing river reeds or shards of wood carved into the shape of swords. Young girls, who days before had faced the prospect of enslavement by the Akkalids—or worse—now danced openly in the street, wearing silver bangles on their wrists and ankles and singing praises to the goddess.

Victory had been snatched from the jaws of defeat by the reckless act of a single spear maiden. Ashurbal's death had thrown the charge of his mighty cavalry into disarray; men tried to turn about and rescue the god-king, tangling with their fellows and sowing confusion in the ranks. The far smaller and weaker Barabi cavalry, held in reserve since the start of the battle, now sensed an opportunity. Their counter-charge sent the Akkalid cavalry reeling, a feat that would have been impossible just moments before. The sight of it sent shockwaves through the Akkalid spearmen, and the Barabi infantry, which had

been on the verge of breaking, rallied their battered lines and launched a ferocious counter-assault of their own. Within minutes, the Akkalids were in full retreat, which another charge by the Barabi cavalry turned into a rout. By the end of the day the survivors were fleeing back into the desert, and the Akkalids' baggage train—heavy with loot from the conquest of several smaller kingdoms—had fallen into Barabi hands.

Whenever the armies of Barabi marched to war, they did so with the blessings of the goddess, and the priestesses and the shield maidens of the temple went with them. Now they led the procession into Sennar, and Sybale was first and foremost among them. The priestesses had bathed her and bound up her wounds, and given her sweet wine laced with herbs so that she could walk without pain. Fragrant oils had been rubbed into her ebon skin until it glowed, and her bloodstained robes and ragged armor had been replaced with gleaming white linen and a shaped leather cuirass ornamented with silver. In one hand she held a spear of dark, polished thornwood; in the other, the heavy golden helmet of Ashurbal, still speckled with the god-king's blood.

The silver-masked priestesses and their white-robed novitiates walked in silent and solemn ranks thirty paces behind Sybale, so that it almost seemed she walked alone among the throng. The empty space was to remind the city—and its king—of the ninety-nine other spear maidens who had been lost fighting the Akkalids. It had been a terrible blow to the temple, and one that the priestesses believed had been done deliberately by Sikarbal, the general of the army. The spear maidens of Bara were trained to be scouts and assassins, not spearmen, and placing them in the battle-line as an infantry unit had all but guaranteed their destruction. The arrogant Sikarbal had done it to weaken the temple and embarrass the king, the priestesses believed. The spear maidens had been sent by the temple to assassinate the Akkalid king in his camp

on the night before the battle. But once the army was in the field, Sikarbal had countermanded their orders, claiming that the assassination attempt stood no chance of success, and kept the spear maidens with the army instead. Sikarbal was the scion of an old and powerful family, which had long coveted the throne. He was also famous for his cruelty, especially to his wives. Sending the spear maidens to their deaths had no doubt pleased him greatly.

But Sikarbal had misjudged badly. He had been outmatched by Ashurbal on the battlefield, and owed his victory to a miracle sent by the goddess herself—or so the priestesses said. Sikarbal's intrigue against the throne would cost him dearly, if they had anything to say about it.

Sybale had listened to the priestesses whisper and scheme as they tended to her wounds. The intrigues of temple and court meant nothing to her, a maiden of nineteen years who knew nothing of the world beyond the rigors of the training field and the nightly rituals of the novitiate. Her whole world had been the sisterhood she shared with the other maidens, and now that was gone.

She walked alone, as if in a dream. The herbs the priestesses had given her dulled the ache of her wounds, but lent everything else a kind of vivid clarity. The din of the crowd vibrated against her skin; she smelled the fragrance of the crushed rose petals under her feet and listened to the tinkle of silver bangles as the dancing girls spun about her. The sky was a cloudless vault of sapphire, and the clay walls of the city, with their warm yellows, deep reds, and rich browns, seemed to glow in the light of the afternoon sun.

The walk to the golden ziggurat that housed Bara's temple seemed to last a lifetime. Sybale led the procession into the walled courtyard, crowded with the city's noble families, and came to a halt amid a fanfare of horns at the base of the steps leading up to the temple. Upon those steps, clad in all their finery, waited the king and his family.

Cartomedes III, King of Barabi and Consort of

the Moon, spread his arms in welcome. He was a giant of a man, muscular and proud, with skin like polished mahogany and a voice as resonant as thunder. He was clad in robes of white samite, and upon his brow rested a crown of gleaming silver set with glistening opals. Behind him stood his many sons and daughters, their eyes bright with curiosity and excitement.

"I see the army of Barabi before me, having returned from the field of war," the king intoned, his deep voice filling the crowded courtyard. "What news do you bring?"

Sybale drew a deep breath. She'd thought she'd be nervous when the time came, but having already slain one god-king, the presence of another did not impress her nearly as much as she'd expected.

"Glad tidings, o king," Sybale answered. She held up Ashurbal's helm for the crowd to see. "We have won a great victory over our enemies, who sought to burn our great city and make us into slaves. Ashurbal, King of the Akkalids, has been slain, and many of his warriors with him. Bara has delivered us in our hour of need!"

Horns blared, and the crowd cheered. "Deliverer! Deliverer!" they cried. Cartomedes favored Sybale with a smile.

But Sybale's eyes were no longer on the king. Her gaze had been drawn instead to a slender figure, swathed in silken veils, who peered shyly at the shield maiden from behind her royal father's imposing form.

It was only a fleeting glimpse. Nothing more. Sybale gazed into a pair of large, dark eyes, bright with mirth. The princess had let the veil covering her face fall away, revealing curved cheekbones, an impish nose, and full lips drawn up in a mischievous grin.

Sybale felt her heart flutter. Her breath caught in her throat. She'd never seen anyone so beautiful in her entire life. For the first time since the battle, she felt her knees go weak.

When the king spoke again, his booming voice seemed to be coming from far, far away. "The priestesses tell me it was you who slew the Akkalid king."

It took a moment for Sybale to respond. "I . . . yes, your highness."

Cartomedes beamed at her. "Barabi owes you a great debt, spear maiden," he declared. "What would you have as your reward?"

Sloane did not keep a house in Skara Brae, as Sybale expected. Instead, he rented five rooms and access to a drafty, cluttered attic from an innkeep whose curiosity began and ended with the stack of coins pressed discreetly into his palm.

The attic was where Sloane did most of his work, despite the layers of dust and the stench of mildew and rat droppings. Rain found its way through dozens of gaps in the old inn's wooden shingles, falling in pattering streams or slow, maddening drips. And it *always* seemed to rain in Skara Brae, Sybale noted sourly, folding her arms tightly beneath her threadbare cloak and staring out at the gray overcast through the grimy attic window. She hadn't seen the sun in almost two weeks.

Sloane and his men took the gloom and the damp in stride. Pdraig and Halvar came and went from the old inn at all hours, carrying out errands and gathering news on what had transpired in the town while Sloane was away. The activities of the Fatherites were of especial interest to the cult leader, and with good reason. The Church of the Swordfather, as Sloane had taught her during the voyage, was the dominant religion in Skara Brae, and tolerated no others before it. Believers in the old faiths were brutally persecuted, facing torture and execution if they did not relent.

Sybale had seen for herself how the Fatherite paladins strode through the streets of Skara Brae, harassing

and terrorizing anyone unfortunate enough to catch their eye. *It's about power*, Sloane had explained. *If the church controls access to the divine, then the people become their slaves. That's what we're fighting against. The power of the Charn means freedom for all.*

Meanwhile, Sloane spent all his waking hours poring over the relic they'd brought back from Barabi. An old trestle table had been set up in the driest section of the attic, which was now covered with an impressive and untidy collection of old books, tattered folios, and sheaves of loose pages filled with strange diagrams and lines of faded script. For days, he had been studying the tiny runes etched into the base of the worn statuette, trying to decipher their meaning. One word in particular seemed to frustrate him, and seemed to hold the key to what he was looking for.

At first, Sybale thought Sloane would ask her for help in puzzling out the runes, but the cult leader's papers were all in Baedish, which she couldn't read, and the runes themselves were unlike anything she'd ever seen. Instead, she was reduced to switching out the candles in the attic when they burned low, tossing out pails of rainwater, and going downstairs morning and evening to fetch Sloane's meals from the innkeep. The rest of the time there was nothing to do but wait, and listen to the endless, maddening patter of the rain.

It was late afternoon, as near as Sybale could tell. Padraig was sleeping in a moldy, overstuffed chair across the attic, and Halvar was amusing himself by throwing a brace of knives at one of the attic's rotting beams. Guthric sat in a pool of candlelight near Sloane's table, singing softly to himself and using a penknife to carve a tiny wooden horse. The big Lestradae rarely spoke, and followed Sloane nearly everywhere he went, like a faithful hound.

As usual, Sloane was hunched over the table, studying the base of the relic with a seeing-glass and

comparing the runes to something in one of his books. Sybale's patience was becoming frayed. She was seriously considering heading downstairs for a cup of wine when she saw the cult leader stiffen. He peered at the relic, then the open book, then back again. "That's it," he said, excitement creeping into his voice. "That's it!"

Halvar paused, his hand on the hilt of a knife buried in the side of a ceiling beam. Padraig, suddenly awake, peered at the cult leader through slitted eyes. Sybale straightened.

"What?" she demanded.

"I know where the scepter is!" Sloane answered. He bent over the statuette again, peering through the glass, and read a word in a language she'd never heard before. The sound of it seemed to reach into Sybale and clench her nerves in a clawed fist. An icy feeling of dread skittered down her spine.

"Gods," Sybale breathed, reeling from the shock. "What was that?"

Sloane bared his teeth in a wolfish grin. "The language of the Charn," he said. "Even now, thousands of years later, their words resonate with power. It's the name of a place, a Charn citadel that once stood here in Caith."

Padraig straightened in his chair, a hungry glint in his black eyes. "That's more like it," he said in a low voice. "Where is this place?"

Sloane carefully set the relic onto the table. "I don't know. But I know how we can find out."

Halvar tightened his grip on the knife and pulled it from the beam. He tested its point with a calloused thumb. A slow smile twisted his narrow features. "Rorke."

Sybale scowled at the Einarr. "Who?"

"A rich merchant and landlord," Sloane told her. "A fat old fool who cheats his tenants and spends the money on rare and forbidden lore." The cult leader's grin twisted into a sneer. "It pleases him to have so much knowledge and power at his fingertips, even if he hasn't the faintest

idea how to use it.” He glanced at Sybale. “You know the type.”

Sybale shifted uncomfortably. Beneath the cloak, her hand rose to the tiny scar at the base of her skull. “You think he has the information we need?”

“He’s got a book containing a map of all the Charn sites on Caith,” Sloane replied. “I’ve been after it for years, but he won’t part with it for any price.”

The attic fell silent, save for the hissing of the rain. Her patience at an end, Sybale snapped. “If he won’t sell it, then we’ll have to take it from him.”

Sloane seemed to consider this for a moment. “I suppose you’re right,” he said gravely. “What other choice do we have?”

Halvar put away his knives. “Guthric and I will see to it,” he said. “We’ll—”

Sloane cut him off with an upraised hand. “Rorke’s collection is well protected. The house is heavily guarded, and I am told there are numerous traps—some physical, others magical. Obtaining the map will require a special set of skills.”

He cast a questioning glance at Sybale. “Well?”

Sybale thought it over. “I’ll need weapons—*real* ones,” she said, “and armor.”

The cult leader smiled. “That can be arranged.”

“Also a set of tools, for dealing with the traps.” She began to pace, her feet gliding soundlessly across the floor. Her sense of agitation faded, replaced by a steely focus honed by years of training. “Some of the items may be difficult to find.”

Sloane produced a scrap of paper and a quill pen. “Write them down. If it exists in Skara Brae, Padraig will find it.”

Sybale crossed to the trestle table and took up the pen.

“Tell me everything you know about this man’s house,” she said, as she started to write.

Chapter Three

Sybale stood in the shadow of a date palm tree, her heart fluttering like a moth in her chest. It was a mild summer night, and the moon was high overhead, casting its spell on the sleeping world below.

The white marble of the princess's garden terrace glimmered in the pale light. The night air was warm and full of perfume. Sybale drew a trembling breath and made the low, lilting call of a dusk wren.

The notes faded, and the night was still again. Sybale stared at the terrace, searching for signs of movement. Had she come too late? Was the princess asleep? The possibility left an ache in her chest.

Sybale forced herself to wait a full ten seconds before calling again—and this time she appeared, gliding languidly from behind silken drapes and out into the moonlight.

Damia! Sybale took a half step forward, out of the shadows, and held out her hands. The princess saw her

and smiled, her feet light on the stones as she ran down the terrace steps and into the garden. And as she did every night they met, Sybale spared a moment to glance up at the face of Bara and pray.

Blessed mother, if this be a dream, let me never wake.

When the king had asked her to name her reward, the answer was already on her lips. The priestesses had told her what to say that very morning, as they'd readied her for the procession.

"I wish nothing more than to serve you, great king, and to protect you from your enemies," *she'd said. After seeing Damia for the first time there was no denying the conviction in her voice.*

Nor was there any denying such a selfless request—certainly not with the priestesses and the noble houses of Barabi looking on. And so Sybale became a member of the royal household, trading her tiny cell in the temple for quarters in the palace. She wore robes of samite and the finest leather armor the temple could provide, as well as a sword and spear from the king's personal armory. Each day she attended the king as he held court at the palace, and stood guard during his sessions with the Council of Lords. It was a not-so-subtle message that the temple, though wounded, was far from powerless, and its reach extended into the very heart of the palace.

The priestesses had succeeded brilliantly. But they hadn't counted on the king's oldest daughter, Damia, and the effect she would have on their shield maiden.

Sybale drew the princess into a fierce embrace, hungry for Damia's softness and warmth. She kissed the side of the princess's neck and buried her face in Damia's soft, dark hair. A smile of pure contentment spread across Sybale's face. "I've missed you," she whispered into Damia's ear.

The princess laughed softly, gripping Sybale's muscular arms. "It's only been a day," she chided. "I've

been spending so much time in the garden the maids are starting to talk."

Sybale frowned, hugging Damia all the tighter. "You're a princess of Sennar," she said. "You may go where you please. Tell the maids to mind their own business, or you'll put out their eyes!"

Dania laughed again. "It's not that simple, and you know it."

Sybale knew nothing of the sort. Discipline in the temple was harsh and unsparing. Many of the minor scars she bore were from one infraction or another over the course of her life. But before she could say as much, Damia had taken her hand and was leading her down a familiar path, deeper into the garden.

For a little while they walked in silence, breathing in the fragrant air and glancing up at the bright moon shining through the palms. Sybale delighted in the warmth of Damia's hand in hers, gently pulling her along. Just a few months ago, she'd never dreamed such a thing was possible. Now it was all that she could think about. She had tried to explain how she felt to Damia many times, but she did not have the words for it.

Sybale squeezed Damia's hand. "You are my joy," she said. "My only joy."

Damia grinned. "And you are my only spear maiden," she replied. Her eyes glinted with mischief. "Had I known what you temple girls were really like, I would have had father send for one of you ages ago!"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Sybale said archly. Damia only laughed, letting go of her hand and running ahead, down the garden path. Sybale gave chase, swift as a tigress through the soft grasses, growling hungrily as she went.

Dania let herself be caught in a clearing in the midst of the lush garden, where a small reflecting pool shimmered like quicksilver in the darkness. To the right, an overhead trellis wound with creeping roses and flame-

of-the-desert created a perfumed bower, beneath which had been laid a fine rug piled with soft cushions where the princess and her favored guests could take their ease.

Sybale snatched the princess off her feet and they fell onto the piled cushions. Damia giggled and squirmed as Sybale tickled her sides and nibbled at the warm flesh of her throat. After a moment, the spear maiden drew back, and stared down into the princess's dark eyes.

"I am yours forever," she said.

The grin faded from Damia's face. Her eyes grew wistful. "Don't say that," she said gently. "Life doesn't work that way. Not for people like you and I."

"We could run away." The words shocked Sybale, even as she said them. She cast a quick guilty glance at the heavens.

"What?"

"Escape would be easy." The spear maiden spoke quickly, warming to the idea. Indeed, she'd trained for this her entire life. "We wait until the night of the new moon, then slip over the palace walls at midnight. There are horses and supplies at the temple, just half a mile away. I could get everything we need and we could be leagues away from the city by dawn. From there, we could ride into the desert, or up into the hills west of Arbaz. No one would ever find us there."

The princess sighed. "And what then? We spend the rest of our lives like bandits, skulking from one oasis to the next? Or herding goats and living in some smelly hut on the side of a mountain?"

Sybale grimaced, stung by Damia's dismissive tone. "For a year, perhaps. Maybe two. Eventually, they would forget—"

"Forget?" Damia's eyes widened. "Are you really that naïve? They would never forget. Not ever. And one day, they would find us. What then?"

"Then I would kill them!" the spear maiden said hotly. "I would die before I let them touch you—"

Damia rose on her elbows, silencing her with a kiss. "Stop," she told Sybale. "Please."

Sybale blinked, fighting back tears. She couldn't remember the last time she'd cried. "I can't lose you. Not now," she whispered. "I'll do anything. Just tell me what to do."

Damia leaned forward and gently kissed her again. After a long moment, she sighed. "I hid a jug of wine at the edge of the pool this morning. It should be good and cold now. Let's start there, and see where that takes us."

Rorke's house was in the wealthier section of town, close to the walls of the old castle. Standing cheek by jowl with its neighbors, the townhome was three stories high, surrounded by a fieldstone wall topped with iron spikes and barred with a heavy, wrought iron gate. The windows along the ground floor were tightly shuttered, and the door was made of thick oak planks, studded with iron nails to turn aside the blow of an axe.

Sybale perched atop the peaked roof of the house next to Rorke's, studying the location of the balconies that ran along the upper floors. The windows of the upper floors were dark, and the courtyard within the perimeter wall was deserted. It was well past midnight, and the rain had given way to a cold mist that draped over the town like a shroud. Anyone with any sense would be indoors, where it was warm and dry.

Slowly, carefully, Sybale rose to a crouch and turned about, making her way down the length of the peaked roof. The houses in this district stood less than twelve feet apart, so when she'd first spied Rorke's house, the solution to the ground defenses had seemed blindingly obvious. Until she'd climbed the neighbor's house and discovered that the roof was covered in wooden shingles that had turned slimy and treacherous in the damp air. *Why couldn't they just have flat rooftops, like civilized people,*

she thought sourly.

At the roof's midpoint she turned about once again and drew a deep breath, gathering her courage. *You did worse than this in training*, she told herself.

She glanced skyward, wishing for a moment that she still had a goddess to pray to. But then she thought of Damia, and the old anger returned, still as hot as ever. She rose onto the balls of her feet and ran, dashing across the length of the roof and launching herself into the space between the two houses.

Her cloak billowed out behind her like a pair of wings, and Sybale felt a momentary stab of fear that it might slow her down just enough to miss her mark. But the roof she'd launched from was a few feet higher than Rorke's, and that provided her the extra distance she needed. She could see that she'd clear the edge of the building and come down on the rear slope of the rooftop.

Sybale's boots hit the wooden shingles and shot out from under her as though they'd been greased. Her left arm and side hit the roof with a muffled thud, and then she was sliding toward the edge, gathering speed as she went. Biting back a curse, she flailed about with her gloved hands, trying to stop her descent, but her palms slid helplessly across the smooth shingles.

The edge of the roof was coming up fast. Sybale pictured the gravel walkway, nearly thirty feet below. As she slid off the roof, she spun, arms outstretched, and grabbed the lip of one of the third-floor balconies. Pain shot along her arms and shoulders, and her chest hit the wooden balustrade hard enough to knock the air from her lungs, but her ribs were spared the worst of the impact thanks to the leather armor she wore. With an effort of will, she pulled herself over the lip and onto the balcony and lay there for a long moment, fighting for air.

When she'd regained her breath, Sybale rose to her knees and patted herself down, checking her gear. She wore a thick leather cuirass, bracers, and greaves over a close-

fitting black tunic and breeches, plus soft leather boots and a black hooded cloak. A pair of daggers was tucked into her belt, alongside a set of lockpicks and other tools. Her hands were covered by supple leather gloves, and, at Sloane's insistence, her features were hidden beneath a black headscarf.

Ignoring the throbbing pain in her torso, Sybale moved quickly to the balcony doors. She paused, checking for traps, then reached for her lockpicks. Her skills were rusty, but the lock was a simple one, and in less than a minute, she was inside.

Beyond the balcony doors was a darkened bedchamber nearly as large as her old apartment at the royal palace. Someone was faintly snoring behind the thin curtains of a four-poster bed on the left side of the room. Drawing one of her daggers, Sybale stole across the room and gently pushed one of the bed curtains aside. In the dim light she saw the tall, gangly figure of a teenage boy, mouth agape, face pressed into an overstuffed feather pillow.

Sybale heard the sound of footsteps, and the faint glow of a candle briefly lit the seams of the bedchamber door. She froze, listening intently. The footsteps continued without pause, taking the candlelight with them.

Moving quickly, Sybale crossed the room and slowly, carefully, eased the bedchamber door open. Beyond was a darkened corridor running the length of the third floor. To her right, less than a dozen feet away, one of Rorke's guards was moving slowly down the hall, a candle held aloft in his left hand. His head was tilted to one side as he studied the shadowy rafters overhead. Her landing on the roof hadn't gone unnoticed.

Sybale took a deep breath and slipped into the corridor. Switching her grip on the dagger, she crept through the darkness toward the unsuspecting guard. The dagger, a long, leaf-shaped elven blade, felt strange in her hand. She'd wanted something simpler and heavier, but Sloane had overruled her. *Let the elves take the blame*

instead of us, he'd said with a wicked grin. That will suit the Fatherites just fine.

The guard had nearly reached a pair of double doors at the end of the passageway. As he reached out to check that the latch was secure, Sybale crossed the last few steps between them and clapped her hand over his mouth. The elven dagger plunged to the hilt into the side of the guard's neck. Blood sprayed across the wall and the surface of the door. The man gave a single choked cry, then slumped to the floor.

Sybale reached for the fallen candlestick and pinched out the light. Silence fell. She listened carefully for a slow count of ten, then stepped over the body and inspected the door. After a moment, she found a tiny aperture—just the right size for a poison needle—under the latch, but it appeared that the trap wasn't armed. Curious, she gently opened the door.

It was another bedchamber, far larger and grander than the first. The bed curtains had been drawn back, the coverings rumpled, but the master of the house was nowhere to be found.

Sybale frowned. This was going to complicate things.

Leaving the door to the bedchamber open, she dashed back down the corridor. The stairs to the lower floors were at the end of the hall. According to Sloane, Rorke's library was on the ground floor, at the western end of the building. *Three more guards*, she reminded herself. *At least one covering the main entrance. The other two—*

Too late, Sybale caught the faint glow of candlelight reflected on the wall of the staircase. As she reached the top step a guard came lumbering around the corner from the second-floor landing.

"Find anything?" the man called out in a low voice. He caught sight of Sybale and his eyes went wide.

Sybale snarled a curse and leapt as the guard went for his sword. They crashed together in a tangle of knees

and elbows, rebounding from the plaster wall. She grabbed the front of the guard's mail hauberk with one hand and stabbed with the other, trying to find an unarmored spot to drive her blade home. Teeth bared, the guard let go of his candle and pummeled Sybale with a scarred fist, trying to knock her away. They struggled for an instant, then the man lost his balance and they fell forward, tumbling down the stairs.

Sybale caught the worst of it, cracking the back of her head on one of the stair risers hard enough to see stars. The next thing she knew, she was fetched up against a wall on the second floor, and the guard was rising above her, clawing his sword from its scabbard. He lunged chopping down at her, and she rose to meet him, throwing up her left arm to try to deflect the blow. The guard misjudged the distance in the dim light, and the blade bit into the wall over her shoulder. Sybale's elven dagger took him under the chin, punching up into his brain.

Panting, Sybale pushed the guard's body aside and used both hands to wrench her dagger free. She shook her head, trying to quell the ringing in her ears, and listened for sounds of alarm. The second floor was dark, and according to Sloane, all but unused. It was possible that no one had heard the struggle.

Rising to her feet, Sybale made her way quickly down the stairs to the first floor. She paused, listening for signs of movement. Hearing none, she dashed silently down the long central hall to the far side of the house.

The warm glow of lamplight outlined the door to Rorke's library. Carefully testing the latch, Sybale found the heavy door unlocked. As quietly as she could, she opened the door just wide enough to slip inside.

A single lamp blazed from the top of a reading desk on the left side of the library, bathing its cluttered surface in ample reading light but leaving much of the rest of the room in shadow. Sybale made out tall bookcases lining each of the four walls, their shelves groaning under the

weight of heavy old tomes and scroll cases. Two small tables and an overstuffed reading chair took up much of the right side of the room, their surfaces likewise piled with careless stacks of books, folios, and curling scrolls.

Rorke sat behind the reading desk, studying the contents of a massive book with a gold-rimmed reading glass. The merchant wore a red cotton robe over his linen nightshirt, and a red sleeping cap that highlighted his round, pasty face and muttonchop whiskers. His eyes were small and deep set, and glinted with avarice.

Sybale moved quickly, darting across the library and around the edge of the reading desk. Rorke was so intent on his latest prize that he didn't notice her presence until she was nearly on top of him.

He glanced up from the book, eyes widening in shock. Sybale slapped him hard across the face, knocking him from his chair. The merchant fell to the floor with a muffled cry that cut off abruptly as an elven dagger pricked the side of his neck.

"Speak louder than a whisper and I'll cut your throat from ear to ear," Sybale hissed. "How do I get into the vault?"

Rorke blinked at her. A trembling hand pointed to the bookshelf on the wall opposite the door. "M-middle shelf. There's a lever built into the right side."

Sybale pulled a short length of braided cord from her belt and tied Rorke's hands behind his back. Finding the merchant awake and in the library might turn out to be a good thing, after all. Sloane had been very specific: he didn't want Rorke dead, just he and his collection exposed to the world at large. Leaving him here, beside the open vault, would create a fine tableau for the city watch—and the Fatherites—to discover.

Rorke grimaced as she drew the cord tight. "Who sent you?" he asked. "Whatever he's paying you, I'll double it!"

Sybale scowled at the merchant. "This isn't about

money,” she spat, producing a knotted cloth and gagging Rorke with it. “It’s about justice!”

She grabbed the merchant by the arm and dragged him into the center of the room. “The secrets of the Charn are mankind’s birthright,” she told him. “It’s bad enough that kings and priests hide the truth from us, the better to keep us under their control. But you”—she glared down at Rorke, feeling a sudden surge of anger—“you do it for no better reason than your own petty greed.”

Rorke gave her a goggle-eyed stare and tried to mumble something past the gag, but Sybale was no longer paying any attention. She turned to the bookshelf on the far wall and started carefully inspecting the middle shelves. The lever was well hidden, but she managed to find it in just a few moments. There was a faint *click*, and a large section of the bookshelf swung open on oiled hinges.

Sybale paused. *That was entirely too easy.* She knelt before the threshold of the secret door, searching for a tripwire or pressure plate. When she found nothing, she reached into a pouch at her belt and pulled out a small glass bottle. Uncorking the bottle, she poured a small amount of silver dust into her palm.

Bending close to the floor, Sybale blew the dust into the air. The particles swirled over the threshold, glittering in the lamplight—then began to slow, gathering together like iron shavings around a lodestone. They formed thin, curving lines that marked the currents of magical power running through a potent ward that had been etched invisibly across the threshold.

Sybale turned back to Rorke. She wrestled the gag out of his mouth and placed the point of her dagger against his left eyelid. “How do I get past the ward?” she demanded.

“You can’t.” There was a tiny gleam of triumph in Rorke’s porcine eyes. “I had it made by one of the best mages in the city. Only I can cross the threshold and live.”

Sybale sat back on her haunches, thinking hard.

Part of her training at the temple dealt with bypassing such traps. One thing she remembered was that wards were very literal in their construction—they had to be, in order to function as designed.

She rose to her feet and grabbed Rorke by the shoulders. If she wanted the book, she was going to have to take a chance.

“Wait!” the merchant protested. “What are you doing?”

She dragged him across the room. With a grunt, she heaved his body halfway across the threshold, then walked over his torso into the vault.

The chamber beyond the secret door was half the size of the main library, and much more neatly kept. The shelves that ran along each wall were half full of ancient leather-bound volumes and careful stacks of scroll cases. The book Sloane sought was a ponderous tome that sat by itself on a high shelf to the left of the door. Sybale wrestled it down from its perch and loaded it into her pack.

The hard part was over. Grinning behind her mask, Sybale crossed back into the library and dragged Rorke away from the threshold. As she did so, she saw the merchant glance past her and let out a garbled shout.

Hissing a curse, Sybale spun just as Rorke’s remaining guardsmen burst into the library, swords at the ready. Behind them came the teenage boy she’d encountered upstairs, still in his nightshirt and pale with shock. She locked eyes with the boy, who stared back in horror and shouted at the guards.

The swordsmen weren’t professionals, Sybale saw at once. They came straight at her, heedless of the cramped quarters and the danger their blades posed to one another once they started swinging. The one on the right tried a wild swipe at her as he advanced, forcing her back a step. She retreated further, placing Rorke’s prone form between her and the guard on the left, but that left her perilously close to the vault and its warded threshold.

The guard on the right tried for her again, lunging forward and chopping at her neck. She managed to block the blow with her elven dagger, but only barely. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see the guard on the left getting ready to jump over Rorke and take her from the side.

Sybale had an idea. She went on the attack, lunging at the guard on the right. The man on the left, seeing his opportunity, jumped over the merchant and tried to stab her with his longer blade, but Sybale was ready for him. Her attack had been a feint; she spun toward the guard on the left as he made his jump, catching his sword wrist with her free hand and hauling him off balance. The man tried to turn and bring his sword around, but he stumbled, falling backward into the open vault.

As the hapless guard crossed the threshold, there was a flash of lightning and a thunderclap that shook the house to its foundations. The man was blown apart, scattering hunks of charred flesh, burnt scraps of clothing, and red-hot fragments of chainmail all over the library. The violence of the blast stunned the surviving guard, who reeled backward and fetched up against the side of the reading desk. Sybale was on him in an instant, dispatching him with a single thrust of her blade.

There was a flash of white near the library door. Rorke's son was fleeing for his life, nightshirt flapping at his heels. Sybale reversed her grip on her dagger. At the last possible moment, she adjusted her throw and buried the elven blade in the doorjamb instead of the boy's back. Someone had to escape and summon the City Watch, she reminded herself.

With a last look at Rorke, who cowered in terror on the library floor, Sybale dashed out into the corridor and made for the kitchens. By the time the merchant's son had returned with a squad of nervous city watchmen in tow, she was already halfway across town.

Chapter Four

The wine was sweet, and cold, and she drank too much, trying to assuage the ache in her heart. She and Damia emptied the bottle, drinking deeply and licking the sticky residue from one another's lips. The night was cool and the stars bright, and after their lovemaking they lay gasping atop the cushions, comfortable in one another's embrace.

Damia drifted off to sleep, as she often did, her head nestled comfortably on Sybale's shoulder. The spear maiden held her, caressing her shoulder and watching the stars wheel through the heavens. In a half hour she would wake the princess and send her back to her bed with gentle kisses and promises of another rendezvous.

But she underestimated the potency of the wine. She rode its waves, heedless of the undertow, and it pulled her down into darkness.

Sybale woke as rough hands seized her arms

and dragged her from the bower. For a moment, all was confusion, but then Damia cried out in fright and Sybale felt her blood turn to ice. Naked, she lashed out with feet and hands, and men fell back gasping in pain.

Blinking the sleep from her eyes, she cast about wildly and saw Damia surrounded by royal guardsmen. More guardsmen filled the clearing, staring at the two women in dismay. By the garden path stood the king, his face white with rage.

Next to the king stood Lord Sikarbal and a handful of Damia's maids. The Barabi lord bared his teeth at Sybale in a hateful grin.

"Traitor!" Cartomedes growled. "I welcomed you into my household, and this is how you repay me?"

The guardsmen leapt for Sybale again, and emotion warred with years of iron discipline. Whatever her feelings, she was still a servant of temple and crown, and so she did not resist as they seized her and forced her to her knees.

"There is no treason here!" she gasped, her head reeling. "I love—"

"It is not for the likes of you to love a princess of the blood!" Cartomedes thundered. "To . . . to sully her before she is wed!"

"Father, please!" Damia protested.

"Silence!" the king roared. He raised a fist to Sybale. "If you weren't a maiden of the temple, I'd have you flayed alive," he said, his voice trembling with rage. "Instead, the High Priestess must decide your fate."

The king turned to Sikarbal. "It appears I am in your debt, my lord," he said grudgingly. "Thank you for bringing this to light before it could cause us any further embarrassment."

Sikarbal bowed obsequiously. "The honor of the royal family must be preserved at all costs," he said gravely. "With your permission, I will escort the princess and her maids back to her bedchamber."

As he spoke, Sikarbal glanced up at Sybale, his eyes

burning with malice, and gave her a slow, mocking wink.

“Don’t you touch her!” Sybale surged to her feet. Guardsmen surrounded her, trying to push her down, but they were like rats wrestling with a tiger. Even Cartomedes fell back a step, shocked by her sudden fury. “Don’t you dare touch her!” she raged. “I’ll kill you, Sikarbal! I swear to Bara, I’ll kill you all!”

Then a fist crashed into the side of Sybale’s head, and the world went black.

They kept her in a lightless cell below the temple for more than a week while the High Priestess Rhotana and the Circle of Elders debated her fate. Finally, one night, a trio of dour priestesses came with a razor and a bowl of water and shaved the stubble from her head. Then they clothed her in sackcloth and ushered her upstairs, all the way to the top of the holy ziggurat, where Rhotana and the Elders waited.

A full moon hung low and bright over the holy sanctum. With the goddess looking on, Sybale was forced to her knees before a square plinth of black marble less than three feet high. The senior members of the temple stood in a semicircle around her, their expressions grim.

The spear maiden paid them little heed. Her heart ached for Damia. She had not stopped thinking of the princess, worrying for her, since the night they had been separated.

“Sybale,” the High Priestess intoned. “You are a maiden of Bara, sworn to the service of the goddess. Do you understand the nature of your crime?”

The spear maiden glanced up at the face of the moon. “I loved someone,” she said in a leaden voice.

“You were not given to the temple so you could love another!” Rhotana snapped. “Least of all one of royal blood. You have forsworn your oaths to the goddess, and to us, your sisters—”

“My sisters are dead,” Sybale interjected.

“—and you have given grave offense to the king and the royal family,” the High Priestess continued. “For anyone else, the punishment for such a crime would be death. But”—she raised a wrinkled hand to the gleaming moon—“because the goddess chose you as our deliverer, your life is not ours to take. Instead, your gifts will be taken from you, and you will be cast out of the temple to live or die as Bara wills it.”

The High Priestess gestured. An attendant came forward, bearing a small wooden chest in her hands. Rhotana opened the chest and drew out a polished silver nail, perhaps two and a half inches long, and a small silver mallet.

A pang of unease crept up Sybale’s spine. “Gifts? I don’t understand.”

Rhotana stepped forward. She held up the nail, glinting coldly in the moonlight. “You will feel the Maiden’s Tear for what remains of your natural life,” she said gravely.

Strong hands gripped Sybale, bending her forward, onto the plinth. Other hands gripped the sides of her head, holding it fast. The spear maiden fought a sudden wave of panic.

“What is this?” she gasped. “What are you doing?”

Rhotana bent over her. The point of the nail pricked the skin at the base of her skull.

“This is the mercy of the goddess you scorned,” the High Priestess told her. “Bear it as long as you can. For if you remove the Maiden’s Tear, you will die.”

Then came the tap of the mallet, and Sybale’s skull exploded with pain.

Sybale leaned against the peeling window frame and stared out across Skara Brae. While she’d been inside Rorke’s house the rains had finally ceased, and the town had woken to a sparkling, cloudless sky. It was a strange

contrast to the storm raging in the streets below.

News of the attack on Rorke's house had spread like wildfire. The city watchmen had told tales of murdered men and elven knives, of a hidden room protected by dreadful magic that killed anyone who tried to go inside. By midmorning the house was surrounded by Fatherite priests and a handful of paladins, who made their own proclamations to the crowd of onlookers and fueled the hysteria further. Rorke had been secretly hoarding tomes of forbidden magic, and the elves had sent an army of assassins to get them back! Agents of darkness were lurking in the streets of Skara Brae, and could strike again at any moment! A paladin and two priests had died trying to get inside the warded vault before the Fatherites had found a way to neutralize it. By then, half the town had become a baying mob, accosting strangers in the street and accusing them of being elves. A pyre was built outside Rorke's house, and all his magical texts were piled upon it. Rorke would have been added to the pile as well, but somehow he and his son had disappeared in the chaos. The mob, not to be denied an execution, seized Rorke's housekeeper and threw her into the flames instead, reasoning that the old woman couldn't possibly have cooked and cleaned for Rorke all those years without being part of his schemes.

It was late afternoon, and the shadows were lengthening in the street below. Sybale watched the smoke from the distant pyre form a thin, greasy ribbon of gray against the perfect blue sky. She winced as she lifted the half-empty wine jug to her lips. Her ears were still ringing, her arms and legs ached down to the bone, and her torso was mottled with bruises from collarbone to hip. By the time she'd made it back to the inn with Rorke's book, she was so stiff she could barely move.

Sloane had been jubilant when she'd placed the heavy volume in his hands. He'd told everyone to stay off the streets for the rest of the day, then ordered a big breakfast from the innkeep and gotten straight to work.

The stolen book did not give up its secrets easily. Hours passed while Sloane consulted different maps and cross-referenced passages between Rorke's book and several of his own. As the day wore on, Halvar and Padraig spent their time drinking and playing dice, or napping in one of the moldy chairs in the attic. Guthric finished carving his horse and started working on its rider, a Baedish warrior with a sword in his upraised hand.

Sybale had spent a few hours trying to sleep in her room, but her nerves were still too taut, and all she could do was toss and turn on the thin horsehair mattress. Around midday she'd given up, gone downstairs for some bread and wine, and then headed back up to the attic. Once the bread was gone, she was left with nothing but the wine and her own restless thoughts to pass the time.

"What a waste. All that knowledge, fed to the flames." Sybale took another drink, grimacing at the taste of the cheap wine. Belatedly, she realized she'd spoken aloud, and everyone in the attic except Guthric was staring at her.

Uncomfortable at the sudden attention, Sybale shifted uneasily on her perch. "It just seems strange, exposing Rorke's collection to the Fatherites," she continued. "I thought the whole point was to pry that knowledge out of the hands of the priests, so everyone could use it."

Halvar, who was slumped in one of the attic's dusty chairs, opened his eyes and grinned. "You know, when you put it like that, it *does* sound a little strange." He sounded sincere, but his eyes glittered with mischief as he glanced over at Sloane.

The Baed put down the book he was reading and gave a long, thoughtful sigh. "Sometimes a sacrifice must be made for the greater good," he said. "The knowledge we stand to gain from the Charn ruin is far greater than anything old Rorke had sitting in his vault."

Sybale thought it over, brows knitting in

consternation. “But why expose them at all?” she replied. “It’s not as though Rorke would have gone to the City Watch and reported the theft.”

“Because now the Fatherites will spend their energies hunting for Rorke instead of noticing us,” Sloane explained. He spoke slowly, as though to a child. “The townsfolk will be seeing elven assassins in every alley and corner, while we escape notice.” He gave Sybale a stern look. “Law and order favors the nobility and the priests,” he told her. “We require chaos in order to thrive.”

Sybale thought it over. “I suppose that makes sense,” she replied.

“Then if you philosophers have nothing else to ponder, perhaps you’d like to hear where the Charn ruin is located.”

That got even Guthric’s interest. Sybale and the others bestirred themselves and gathered around Sloane’s worktable as he unrolled a map of Caith and weighted the corners down with books.

“I believed the citadel to be north and west of here, high up in the hills,” Sloane said ruefully. “When all this time, it’s been down in the lowlands, surrounded by farms and forests.”

Sybale watched Sloane’s finger slide across the yellowed map south and west, to a region of wooded foothills, not far from the border with Lestras. “What do you reckon, Padraig?”

Padraig studied the map with narrowed eyes for a moment, tapping the stem of his pipe against his lower lip. “That’s Harrowford land,” he said with a grunt. He made a sour face. “Could be worse, I suppose, but not by much.”

Halvar cocked an eyebrow at Sloane. “What do we know about this Lord Harrowford?”

“Old blood,” Padraig said. “One of the oldest in the lowlands. Not so powerful as they once were, of course, but still no one to trifle with. Lord Harrowford keeps to the old ways, which means he’s no friend of ours—or the

Fatherites, for that matter.” The Baed chewed meditatively on his pipe stem. “There’ve been rumors for years that there were Charn ruins on his land. Has a mage to keep ’em hidden from prying eyes.”

“Well, he can’t hide ’em from us,” Halvar said with a grin. “We’ve got a map that shows us right where to go. We sneak in at night, who’s to know we’re even there?”

Sloane shook his head. “This isn’t like breaking into Rorke’s house and stealing a book. We’re going to need strong backs to clean the citadel out. A *lot* of them.” He leaned back, brooding on the map. “This mage of his might have a spell laid on the place that warns him when trespassers are near. We might make it inside undetected, only to find Lord Harrowford and all his men waiting for us when we come out.”

After a moment’s thought, Sloane glanced up at Padraig. “The Fatherites have a church nearby?”

Padraig chuckled. “There’s one in the town outside Harrowford’s castle. A big one, if I remember right. Probably put there to keep the old lord in his place.”

Sloane thought it over. “Good,” he said, nodding slowly. “Very good.” He glanced at Halvar.

“Round up a pair of horses, and food for five days’ travel. Padraig and Sybale are going on a little trip tomorrow.”

Chapter Five

The orange rolled from Tanit's open hand and made a soft thump on the imported Mersine rug. Her friends, swathed in colorful silks, leaned back on their divans and tittered.

"Pick it up."

Tanit's command reached Sybale through a red haze of pain. She knelt on the flagstones behind and to the right of her mistress's divan, where she could quickly refill a wine cup or provide small dishes of fruit to Tanit and her guests.

The orange was little more than four feet away, resting in a patch of sunlight amid the three divans.

Sybale took a deep breath. Her joints flared like hot coals. Gritting her teeth at a rising tide of pain, she placed her palms flat on the flagstones and pushed herself upright. It took all of her will not to cry out in pain. Her nerves vibrated like plucked wires, reverberating all the way up

her body to the silver nail embedded in the back of her skull.

Pain had been her constant companion since she'd been cast out of the temple. Her body was still supple and strong, conditioned by years of hard training. In fact, it had not changed at all since the touch of Bara's Tear. Her scalp was still as smooth as when the priestesses had shaved it nearly a year ago, displaying the glinting head of the silver nail for the entire world to see. But she suffered like a woman four times her age, her joints stiff and aching, her fingers clumsy, and her senses dulled.

Fully upright, Sybale wavered slightly as her right leg went momentarily weak. There was a narrow space between the silver tray piled with fruit on her right and the corner of Tanit's divan on her left. She did not dare touch the divan, not even in passing. Tanit's two friends watched her intently, their eyes shining with mirth.

She shuffled forward, gritting her teeth, placing each foot with care. Tanit shifted slightly, watching Sybale out of the corner of her eye. She gave a tiny sigh of impatience.

It took seven careful steps to reach the fallen orange. Sybale sank to her knees again, her joints seething like red-hot coals. Composing herself, she bent forward, reaching for the fruit with her left hand.

She heard the whicker of the reed switch an instant before it struck, carving a line of fire across her shoulders through the thin tunic she wore. One of Tanit's friends let out a peal of laughter.

"What in Bara's name are you waiting for, slave? I said pick it up!" The switch fell again. Tanit's aim was honed by constant practice, laying out a pattern of painful welts across Sybale's shoulders.

Sybale's trembling hand closed on the orange. Another blow struck her arm at the elbow, but she managed to keep hold of the fruit. Gritting her teeth, she turned to face Tanit and offered it to her.

"H-here, mistress," she said.

Tanit was leaning forward, her beautiful face transformed into a mask of eager cruelty. The switch was raised in her slender hand, ready for another blow. She had a small, slender frame, like a bird's, with huge dark eyes and rosebud lips. She stared into Sybale's eyes, searching for the slightest sign of defiance.

Her two friends were delighted by the sport. "I want to try!" one of them said, reaching for the switch with a plump hand.

A faint smile crossed Tanit's face. "Perhaps later, if you're good," she said.

The friend pouted. "Just one blow! I won't hit her anywhere it shows!"

Tanit frowned dismissively. "Let's go," she said, rising from the divan. "The races start in an hour. I want to be in my box in time for the processional." Tanit's interest in a young chariot racer named Simicar was the latest of her scandals, heaping further shame on the house of Gisco.

Tossing the switch onto the divan, Tanit adjusted her robes and her carefully pinned dark hair. Her friends followed suit, still laughing, gossiping now about the love lives of the chariot racers and their many physical charms. Sybale knelt forgotten in their midst, her hand with the orange still outstretched to her mistress. She stayed that way as they filed languidly from the chamber; her eyes downcast, biting back hot tears of rage and pain.

The first few months of her exile had been the hardest of her life. Her shaved head and temple robes had marked her instantly, and within days it seemed that the whole city knew of her crime. Her heroism on the battlefield was forgotten, and the people of Sennar heaped abuse on her whenever they could. She had lived like an animal, eating scraps and sleeping in the gutter, never staying in one place too long for fear of drawing the attention of the city guard.

Sometimes, when the desert nights were cold and

her belly ached with hunger, she would reach up and caress the head of the silver nail that nestled at the base of her skull. Death whispered to her, offering her peace. But then she thought of Damia, suffering at the hands of Lord Sikarbal, and she would pull her hand away instead.

The wedding had been announced within days of Sybale's exile. The ceremony had been a lavish one, even by royal standards, with a great processional bearing the newlyweds from the palace to Sikarbal's estate outside the city. There, a great feast had been held in their honor, with guests from all across the kingdom.

From Sybale's perspective, the celebrations seemed calculated to torment her. She'd tried to stay away, but for once, her iron will had failed her. Sikarbal's men had caught her outside the residence and beaten her expertly, then left her where she could listen to the sounds of music and merriment that rose from the estate's garden long into the night.

No doubt Sikarbal expected her to die that night. But her love for Damia wouldn't allow it. Instead, she began to formulate a plan.

Sybale took a deep breath and crawled back across the rug to the silver tray. Placing the orange with the rest of the fruit, she gripped the tray with trembling hands and slowly forced herself to stand. The room swam for a moment as a tide of pain threatened to overwhelm her, but she waited and focused on her breathing until it passed. With careful steps, she shuffled across the chamber and into the corridor beyond.

The house of Gisco was an old and wealthy one, having made its fortune as traders plying the coastal routes from Barabi to Merséa, and across the forbidding seas to Lestras. The head of the house was a dignified, educated man named Bomicar, who was famous throughout the city both for his wealth and for his library of ancient texts and artifacts, gathered from all over the known world.

Bomicar was also—as the gossips at the city well

would tell anyone willing to listen—infamously married to a woman young enough to be his daughter, a shameless gold-digger who squandered his hard-earned wealth and spent her nights away from home, often in the arms of other men. She was also famously vicious to the house servants. Few lasted more than a year before being driven away—or were too broken to continue their duties, and then cruelly dismissed.

Sybale spent weeks listening to the old wives and widows talk, learning everything she could about the house of Gisco. Then, when she was ready, she made her way to the gates of the estate and begged the chief housekeeper for a job.

She was turned down without hesitation. Not once, not twice, but three times, until finally the exasperated chief housekeeper threatened to have Gisco's manservants beat her senseless. Just as Sybale hoped, the confrontation drew the attention of Bomicar's wife, Tanit. The sadistic creature took one look at Sybale and ordered the chief housekeeper to take her in.

Tanit had taken special interest in Sybale ever since, often insisting on her presence when she entertained guests. It was only due to the power of Bara's Tear that she wasn't covered in scars from the whippings she'd endured. She dreaded the day that Tanit realized it herself. There was no telling what she might try then.

The corridor outside the women's chambers overlooked the house's central courtyard. Sybale shuffled along, squinting in the late afternoon sunlight, and slowly, painfully, descended the steps to the ground floor.

Bomicar was reclining in a leather-backed chair in the courtyard, dozing in the shade of a date palm tree. Sybale paused. The rest of the servants were at the rear of the house, preparing the evening meal. Her pulse quickening, she altered her course and turned down a side corridor, moving as quickly as her body would allow.

The door to the library was at the far end of the

hall. Sybale knew it was never locked, despite the treasures displayed inside. She nudged the door open with the tray and shuffled inside.

She'd never seen so many books and scrolls in one place, not even at the temple. Tall bookshelves, their upper levels accessible only by ladders, lined each wall, each one neatly packed with as many tomes and scroll cases as they would allow. Dozens of languages were represented, including Akkalid, Mersine, and Baedish. Some were written in a tongue that Sybale had never seen before, inscribed on curious parchment with ink the color of rust.

Sybale set the tray on a reading desk nearby, and shuffled across the room to the spot where she'd left off just two days before. She'd been stealing a few minutes here and a few minutes there for months to sneak into the library and search the shelves, and she'd examined only a fraction of what was inside.

If there was anywhere in Sennar that contained the knowledge to safely remove Bara's Tear, it had to be the library of Bomicar Gisco.

Running her fingers lightly along the spines of the leather-bound books, Sybale came to the place where she'd stopped before and, gritting her teeth, pulled the heavy tome from the shelf. The writing inside was in Mersine, and it took a moment to translate the long column of densely packed characters. Checking several more pages confirmed that it was a book on philosophy. Sybale sighed quietly and wrestled it back onto the shelf. The book prior to this one, she recalled, had been about horticulture. The one prior to that had been about pottery. If there was any rhyme or reason to the library's organization, only Bomicar himself knew it.

As she reached the next book in line she heard a voice behind her. "Well, well. What have we here?"

Sybale jumped, crying out as the book tumbled from her clumsy fingers. She turned to find Bomicar standing by the reading desk at the entrance to the library. He had

a face weathered by years at sea, with deep lines across his forehead and crow's feet at the corners of his eyes. His white beard lent him an air of dignity and wisdom that Sybale might have found reassuring under other circumstances.

"F-forgive me, master," she stammered, stifling a groan as she bent to pick up the book. "I was just—"

"I can see what you were doing," Bomcar said with a chuckle. "I'm not that blind yet." He shuffled across the room. "Here. Let me help with that."

The old man gently took the book from Sybale's hands. He paused for a moment, and then opened it to a random page. Bomcar pointed to a passage with an unsteady hand. "What does that say?"

Sybale gave him a wary look, then turned her attention to the page. It was written in Akkalid and went on at great length about the breeds of horses favored by the desert tribes.

After she'd read the passage, Bomcar took the book to his desk and picked up a reading lens. He bent low over the page, squinting through the lens, muttering the words to himself as he read. Finally he straightened, favoring her with a smile.

"How many languages did they teach you at the temple?" he asked.

"Five," she said. "Akkalid, Mersine, Dolva, Lestradae, and Urgan, of course."

Bomcar stared at her. "Five," he said in wonder. "And all this time you've been serving fruit to my wife." He shook his head. "Well. That's going to change."

Lord Harrowford's castle crowned a bald hill overlooking the town of Bentwater. The fortress was ancient and well sited, with commanding views of the lowlands to the south and the Ulstrigg Mountains. An irregular curtain wall followed the contours of the

hilltop, with squat towers every fifty feet along its length, surrounding an imposing inner keep nearly four stories high.

It was an overcast night, the moon little more than a diffuse silver glow behind thick layers of cloud. The air had turned chilly after sunset, with a fickle wind blowing from the north and east. At close to midnight, there were few men walking the ramparts. The Lestras border had been quiet for years, and bandits knew better than to try their luck with old Lord Harrowford.

The wind shifted again, whistling around the corner of the citadel and tugging malevolently at Sybale's tunic. Cursing silently, she pressed her body as close to the side of the tower as she could, forcing her fingers and toes deep into the crevices between the weathered granite blocks. Pressing her cheek against the rough stone, she risked a glance down at the castle courtyard, seventy feet below. With so little moonlight, the courtyard was a pool of shadow, concealing the hard flagstones that waited for her if the wind succeeded in prying her free.

Always have to do things the hard way, she thought ruefully. It was more an observation than an admonition. It wasn't as though she could steal a uniform and sneak into the citadel as one of the guards.

According to Padraig, the living quarters of the lord and his family, plus any senior retainers, would take up the top two floors of the citadel. While the lower floors were fitted with sinister-looking arrow slits for archers to shoot down into the courtyard, the upper levels of the tower boasted tall, arched windows with leaded glass panes.

Faint lamplight shone through the closest window, less than five feet above. From where she clung like a fly to the side of the tower, she could see that there were no latches or hinges built into the frame.

The wind ebbed again. Sybale drew a deep breath and stretched, reaching upward for another tenuous handhold.

Twenty minutes later, she reached the top of the tower. As she'd hoped, there was no one about. With the last of her strength, she pulled herself through an embrasure and collapsed onto the flat, stone roof. There she lay for several minutes more, staring up at the clouds and waiting for her muscles to stop cramping. When she finally felt able to move again, she rolled onto her feet and crept to the narrow staircase that led down into the tower.

The door at the bottom of the staircase was neither locked nor barred. To be safe, Sybale drew a pinch of grease from a leather pouch at her belt and treated both hinges before slowly pulling the door open. The uppermost level of the tower was quiet. One of Harrowford's retainers, an elderly man in a dark green tunic, slouched in a chair beside a tall oak door, snoring softly.

Sybale crept through the doorway, pulling the door shut behind her. There were four other doors on this floor. She presumed the one attended by the retainer was for Lord Harrowford's quarters, and could be safely ignored. Reaching into another pouch on her belt, she pulled out the artifact Sloane had given her.

The Charn relic was a spindle-shaped crystal the size of her palm, broad at the middle and tapering to a point at top and bottom. It was enclosed in a lattice of silver wire, tarnished and pitted by age, with a tiny loop at the top that suggested it was once worn around the neck. Something floated in the center of the crystal's smoky depths, curled in on itself in a kind of fetal pose. Sybale couldn't make it out, but whatever it was, it had too many limbs to be human.

As instructed, Sybale eased up to the nearest door and held up the crystal, then murmured the word Sloane had taught her. She grimaced as the uncanny syllables twisted her tongue.

Nothing happened. Sybale crept to the next door and tried again.

Within minutes, she had checked all of the doors on the top floor. The retainer snored on, his sleep untroubled.

Sybale eased past the old man and descended the next flight of stairs.

There were four more doors on the next level. Sybale checked the first two, with no success. Then, at the third door, she spoke the word, and the thing inside the ancient crystal *stirred*.

Unnerved, Sybale stuffed the relic back into her belt pouch. Drawing one of her fighting knives, she steadied herself and then tried the chamber door. It was unlocked, and swung open easily at her touch.

The room beyond was large. Sybale could see a writing desk against one wall, flanked by tall bookshelves, plus a small table piled with papers. A narrow bed took up one corner of the chamber. A man lay atop it, still in his robes, his face turned to the wall.

Sybale crept into the room, pushing the door shut behind her. Her eyes never left the mage, who appeared deeply asleep. She tightened her grip on the knife. A quick thrust to the heart, and the man would be dead before he knew it.

She did not relish what would come next, but Sloane's instructions had been explicit. By morning, the mage's head and a pile of his bloodstained papers would be found on the porch of the Fatherite church in town, and Lord Harrowford would have a great deal of explaining to do.

Silent as a shadow, Sybale stalked over to the bed. The mage's breathing remained slow and steady. The point of the knife lowered until it hovered just to the right of the man's breastbone. She bent over him, reaching out with her left hand to clamp over his mouth as the blade slid home.

At the very last moment, the mage's eyes snapped open. Sybale had a fraction of a second to realize she'd been duped before the man's fist crashed into her chest.

The blow flung her across the room like a rag doll. Sybale crashed into one of the mage's bookshelves and fell to the floor in an avalanche of splintered wood and arcane

lore. Her ribs ached like fire where the blow landed, even through the thick leather cuirass, and the wind had been knocked from her lungs.

The mage leapt from his bed, his expression triumphant. “She’s here!” he called out. “I have her!”

Sybale’s mind reeled as she struggled for air. *A trap!* She thrashed amid the piles of fallen books, struggling to reach her feet. The mage advanced on her with a wolfish grin, his right fist clenched. Belatedly, Sybale realized she’d lost her knife. She grabbed the nearest book and hurled it, but the mage easily batted it aside.

The door burst open. A pair of men-at-arms rushed through the doorway, followed by a dark-haired woman in green robes armed with a gnarled oaken staff. The room suddenly seemed a great deal smaller than it had a few moments before.

Teeth bared in a snarl, Sybale hurled another book—this time at the oncoming swordsmen—and lunged at the mage.

The mage was as strong as an ogre, but that didn’t make him a skilled fighter. Her sudden lunge caught him by surprise. She ducked under his wild swing and grabbed the front of his robe with both hands. Planting her right foot, she swung with all the momentum she had, pulling the mage off balance, and hurled him through the closest window.

The mage’s surprised scream almost made up for the desperate situation she now found herself in.

The men-at-arms wore chainmail hauberks and steel helmets, and moved like they knew their trade. They spread out slightly and advanced on Sybale, forcing her to give ground. The woman advanced with them, her staff held before her like a spear. She had dark eyes and a pale face that was livid with rage.

“Servant of darkness!” she snapped. “Did you think we wouldn’t sense your coming? We’ve protected this land from your kind for generations, and by the grace of the old

gods the evil you serve will not rise again!”

“A priestess,” Sybale sneered. “Hiding your schemes behind a veil of righteousness! Spare me your lies, sister. I’ve heard them all before.”

She drew her other knife and lunged at one of the swordsmen. The point of her blade drew a shallow cut on the man’s forearm and he fell back with a curse. His companion saw his opportunity and struck, swinging at Sybale’s chest. She ducked back, taking a glancing blow on the cuirass that was right above where the mage’s fist had struck. Molten pain radiated from her ribcage, nearly taking her breath away.

She staggered—and the movement saved her life. A bolt of fire stabbed at her from behind, passing over her shoulder close enough to scorch her exposed skin. It missed one of the men-at-arms by scant inches before detonating against the wall.

Stunned, Sybale glanced over her shoulder. Outside, past the jagged window frame, she saw the mage floating in the air. He was close enough that she could see the rage on his face as he began chanting the words of another spell.

“You cannot win!” the priestess shouted. “Not now, not ever! The heroes of Caith will fight you at every turn!”

Sybale could tell that she meant every word she said. Worse, she might be right. The tide of the battle had decidedly turned against her. She was running out of options fast.

She took a swipe at the man on her left, aiming for his eyes. When he fell back, she lunged to the right, stabbing at the second man and trying to slip past him and reach the door. The knife bit into the rings of the man’s hauberk, eliciting a grunt, but he refused to give ground. Instead, Sybale was brought up short as his sword stroke nearly took her head off.

There was a blaze of blue-white light, and a force hurled Sybale backward against the mage’s bed. A second later came a blast of thunder that reverberated in her bones.

When her vision cleared, Sybale saw the man-at-arms who'd swung at her lying on the floor, limbs contorted in agony. The lightning bolt that had been aimed for her had been drawn to him instead, bursting his mail hauberk and turning his sword into a red-hot brand. The woman was standing over the stricken man, lips parted in prayer, while the second man-at-arms had crossed the room and now stood between Sybale and the door.

The mage's lightning bolt hadn't done her any good either. Her armor was smoldering, and her muscles screamed in pain. She couldn't keep going much longer.

The knife she'd lost lay on the floor by the end of the bed. Sybale scooped it up with her free hand as she lurched unsteadily to her feet. To her left, she could see the mage hovering just outside the window, close enough to ensure that his next bolt wouldn't miss. Shouts echoed from beyond the doorway as more reinforcements arrived. The man-at-arms facing her gave her a knowing grin.

Shouting a battle cry, Sybale lunged at the swordsman. The man fell back a step—then realized, too late, that it was a feint. Her right hand snapped forward, spinning the knife past the swordsman's shoulder and thudding it into the woman's chest. The man-at-arms turned, crying out in horror as the priestess fell. By then Sybale was running, leaping through the shattered window and onto the mage hovering outside.

They fell in a tangle of limbs, tumbling slowly toward the flagstones below. The mage struggled in Sybale's grasp, trying to maintain the spell. Fifteen feet from the ground her knife slid between the man's ribs, and the courtyard abruptly rushed to meet them. The mage's body hit the flagstones like a sack of meal. Sybale rolled with the impact, staggering as she came upright. Gritting her teeth, she staggered toward the mage's body. His head still looked intact enough to take.

An arrow whistled past her ear, close enough to make her flinch. Another struck sparks from the flagstones

at her feet. Cursing in frustration, Sybale abandoned her prize and ran for the outer wall.

The shouts of men in the tower above echoed in the darkness. But it was another's words that hounded Sybale as she fled into the night. The voice of the woman—the priestess—followed after her, worrying at her heart.

Chapter Six

Sybale followed her master and his guest into the library. Dinner had gone on well into the night as the two men had shared stories and talked about their travels over jugs of expensive wine. Bomicar treated the foreigner like an old friend, which was strange enough, as the old man was a famous recluse. It was stranger still when the old man suggested that they should retire to the library, and that Sybale should accompany them. As she shuffled down the corridor in their wake, she couldn't help but notice the cloth-wrapped parcel tucked beneath the foreigner's arm.

Her role in the household had changed dramatically since Bomicar discovered that she could read. The old man's eyesight was failing, and he could no longer read many of the older books in his collection. Overnight, Sybale became his personal scribe and assistant, attending to correspondence and helping him organize his vast library.

Not that this saved her from Tanit's petty cruelties.

If anything, Bomicar's young wife went out of her way to torment Sybale at every opportunity. It had gotten so bad that Tanit had fallen into the habit of carrying her reed switch wherever she went in the house. Each night, when Tanit left to carouse in the city with her paramour Simicar, the entire household breathed a sigh of relief.

By the time Sybale reached the library door, the two men were seated across from each another at Bomicar's desk. His guest, a handsome Baed named Sloane, was surveying the packed bookshelves with an appreciative eye.

"This is an amazing collection, my friend," Sloane observed. His Urgun was accented, but perfectly understandable. "Your library has doubled in size since the last time I visited."

Bomicar smiled proudly. "I have been very fortunate these past few years, thanks to help from kind souls such as yourself."

Sloane laughed. "Oh, yes. I am the very soul of kindness." His dark eyes glittered with mischief. "There was one book in particular that you were searching for, if I remember rightly. A work of esoteric lore from lost Samartha, in the shadowed east."

Bomicar's smile widened, but his cloudy eyes took on a hungry gleam. "Bara has not favored me that much, I'm afraid. In fact, as the years go by, I become less convinced that the book ever existed at all."

Sloane grinned. "Of course. Only two copies were ever spoken of, and they disappeared from sight a hundred years ago." His hand came to rest lightly on the parcel in his lap.

"A hundred and fifty-seven years, to be precise," Bomicar replied. He leaned forward in his chair, his expression intent. "Do you have something you wish to share with me, Sloane?"

Sloane did not reply at first. Instead, he straightened in his chair and made a point of looking around the library. "The last time I was here, you showed me a curious

little relic," he said. "A statuette made from obsidian, or something like it, about a foot high. Do you still have it?"

The hungry glint remained in Bomicar's eyes, but his expression turned guarded. "I do," he said warily.

"May I see it?"

Bomicar weighed the request. Finally, he turned to Sybale and gestured at a small cabinet in the far corner of the room.

Moving as quickly as her tortured body would allow, Sybale went to the cabinet. She could feel Sloane's gaze following her as she made her way across the room. More than once she'd caught him staring at her during dinner, though she could not fathom why.

The cabinet was small and unobtrusive, and made of black lacquered wood. In all the months she'd spent in the library, she'd scarcely noticed it was there. Opening the cabinet's double doors, Sybale felt a strange sense of foreboding steal over her.

Inside the cabinet were a number of small objects wrapped in silk, and several curious wooden boxes tied shut with complex knots of silken ribbon. Standing by itself on a high shelf was a statuette carved from some kind of glossy black stone. It depicted a gaunt figure in ornate robes, wearing a strange kind of angular, inhuman mask. The figure's elongated hands held an elaborate scepter against its chest.

She reached in and picked up the statuette. The relic was surprisingly heavy and cold to the touch. There were runes carved into the octagonal base. She could feel them pressing into the skin of her palms as she brought it over to Sloane.

The Baed turned solemn as she approached. He accepted the statuette reverently, and for a moment he gazed at its alien features with wonder. Belatedly, he looked up at Sybale and smiled. "This is for your master," he said, offering her the parcel.

While Sloane stared raptly at the relic, Sybale

placed the parcel on the desk before Bomicar. The old man unwrapped it with trembling hands. Within were the remnants of an ancient book, its bindings long since worn away.

Bomicar gently lifted the cover and set it aside. He reached out and grasped Sybale's wrist. "Can you read it, child?" he whispered.

Sybale bent over the page. The tiny writing looked like Dolva, but it was an archaic form she'd never seen before. It took her more than a minute to puzzle out the title.

"The . . . Ranks—no, the Hierarchies—of Adresh," she recited. "Being a . . . Meditation . . . on the Outer Realms of . . . Existence . . ."

Bomicar cried out in amazement. "You found it! After all these years!"

"I told you I would," Sloane said softly. "Found it in a temple in the ruins of Samartha itself. I was the only member of the expedition to make it out, and I was sick with black fever for months afterward."

The knowledge that the book came from such an accursed place only seemed to excite Bomicar further. "I will give you five thousand silver talents for the book!" he exclaimed.

Sybale was stunned. Bomicar was a wealthy man, but that was an obscene amount of coin even by his standards.

Sloane laughed again. "Since when do collectors like us deal in petty coin?" He hefted the relic. "I will trade you the rarest book in the world for this one piece of stone."

The joy went out of Bomicar's face. "As I told you long ago, some things are best left undisturbed," he said gravely.

"I know," Sloane replied. "But that was before I had the book."

Bomicar's gaze fell to the ancient pages on the desk.

His wrinkled fingers brushed lightly across the faded ink. Then, with a sigh, he returned the cover to its place and covered it with cloth.

"I cannot," he said, his voice thick with disappointment.

Sloane studied the old man for a moment, looking for a sign of uncertainty. Finding none, he sighed. "Well. That's unfortunate."

He rose from the chair and set the relic on Bomicar's desk, then made a show of wrapping up the book and tucking it under his arm. "I regret that the evening must end on such a disappointing note," he said. "My ship leaves for Caith in two days. You can find me at the Silvertide Inn, down by the docks, if you change your mind."

"I shall think on it," Bomicar said half-heartedly, but it was clear from the dejected look in his eyes that the old man wasn't going to change his mind. He gestured to Sybale to show his guest out.

Sloane paced himself to Sybale's tortured gait as they made their way down the corridor and into the courtyard. The moon was high and bright overhead, attended by a vast procession of stars. Sloane paused, glancing up at the firmament.

"Do you miss it?" he asked.

Sybale paused. "Miss what?"

"Everything they took from you."

Sybale stiffened. "I don't know what you mean."

The Baed turned to stare at her. The mischievous glint was back in his eyes.

"Don't insult my intelligence, Sybale. I've had enough of that for one night," he said. "I know exactly who you are, and I know what the temple did to you."

He leaned close, his voice dropping to a whisper. "And I know how to pluck that nail from your head and give you back your life."

Sybale stared at the man in stunned silence. He

smiled, seeing the spark of desire in her eyes.

“The Silvertide Inn. Tomorrow night. Bring me the relic, and I’ll set you free.”

Without waiting for an answer, Sloane crossed the courtyard and disappeared into the night.

As fate would have it, the near-disaster at Harrowford Castle achieved the desired result. The sorcery unleashed at the citadel lit up the night sky and was witnessed by more than a few of the nearby townsfolk—including the local Fatherite priest. When the priest arrived at the gates of the castle the next morning, old Lord Harrowford turned him away.

Within a week, the priest was back again, this time with a contingent of heavily armed paladins and a dozen dour-faced inquisitors from Lestrass. By then, Lord Harrowford was gone, along with his daughter and his household, and the church claimed his lands and possessions by default.

Now, nearly a month later, the castle sat empty, while high-ranking church officials back in Lestrass intrigued over who would ultimately control it. Harrowford’s tenants, many of whom had farmed the land for generations, were evicted from their homes. The upheaval had drawn the attention of bandits, who prowled at will along the trade roads and preyed on rich and poor alike.

Sloane was swift to take advantage of the chaos. Three weeks after Sybale’s attack on the castle, he and the others left Skara Brae for the lowlands. Along the way, they met up with a dozen more members of the cult, summoned to take part in the exploration of the Charn ruins. The party met up with Padraig and Sybale at their camp, which sat atop a secluded hill just a few miles from where the ruins were thought to be.

As soon as Sloane reached camp he started sending

out small parties to scout the countryside and forage for supplies. Sybale kept to herself, going out alone each day and returning well past dark.

The farm was small but well kept, and the fields had been tended with care. There was a fenced pasture for a cow or two, a coop for chickens, and a barn that had room for a horse and wagon. The fieldstone house had a sod roof and wooden shutters over the windows.

Sybale stood in the open doorway of the farmhouse. Birds chirped in the eaves, but inside the house the air was still. The hearth was cold, the kettle gone from its hook. The big table in the center of the room stood askew. Shelves that once held plates and cups were now bare. The life that had once animated the place was gone. Not even a mouse scratched behind the woodwork.

She had seen a dozen more farms like these. Some bigger, some smaller, but all of them left hollow and forlorn. She'd seen families on the road, clutching their meager possessions and struggling against despair as they left their homes behind.

This is my doing, Sybale thought. All of these lives uprooted. All because of me.

As she searched through empty cupboards, her thoughts turned to the priestess she'd fought at the castle. She'd thought of her more and more over the last few days, as she'd seen firsthand the consequences of that fateful night.

I'm doing this for Damia, she told herself. Her life was uprooted too. Sybale had no illusions about the cost to her own life. Up until she met Damia, she'd been little more than a trained hound serving her masters. She hadn't known what life truly was.

Sloane said that sacrifices would have to be made. Sybale understood that. She'd been happy to see corrupt old men like Rorke take the fall. Now, however, it was

innocent people who were paying the price.

The Silvertide Inn sat at the end of a secluded street near the city docks, separate from the mangy dives of the sailors, but close enough that their carousing carried clearly on the breeze.

The houses along the street were dark at this time of night, and Sybale's nerves were strained nearly to the point of breaking. She'd left the house of Gisco just minutes after Tanit, sneaking through the courtyard with Bomicar's prized relic while the old man dozed in a chair just a few feet away. That had been hours ago; by now, Bomicar knew she was missing. If he thought to search the library and find the statuette missing, he would guess where she had gone. She cast a nervous glance over her shoulder with every step, expecting to see the City Watch at the end of the street.

The effort of crossing the city had left her exhausted. Every step sent ripples of pain coursing through her body. She crept from one shadow to the next, pausing for breath like a wounded animal. Now, with her destination in sight, she drove herself forward by willpower alone.

The door to the inn was shut, and the windows closed up. The place seemed deserted. Leaning against the doorframe, she knocked weakly on the door.

For a long while, nothing happened. Sybale began to fear that she'd made a terrible mistake and gone to the wrong inn. But then came the rattle of a bolt, and the door opened just wide enough to reveal the scowling face of the innkeep. Before Sybale could speak, the man stepped back and beckoned her to come inside.

The common room of the inn was dark, its tables empty. The innkeep made no comment, only beckoning for her to follow. She followed him as best as she was able, struggling up a short flight of stairs one agonizing step at a time.

Halfway down a dark hall, a door opened, spilling warm candlelight onto the wooden floor. Sloane appeared in the doorway, welcoming her with a smile and a knowing look in his eyes.

"Come inside," he said, taking her gently by the arm.

The room was nothing like she'd expected. It was empty of furniture except for a stout wooden table, covered with symbols and strange runes painted with a strange pinkish fluid. A number of tall candles rose from the floor at seemingly random points around the room. A stout, red-bearded Baed stood in one corner of the room, watching her intently. He was stripped to the waist, revealing an intricate series of blue-tinged tattoos covering his torso. Sloane turned to the tattooed man as the innkeep pulled the door shut behind them.

"You see, Padraig?" Sloane said. "I told you she would come. I knew it from the moment I saw her." He turned to Sybale with the same knowing look. "She wishes to upend the world, just like us."

"You said you could remove the nail," Sybale said, trying to put some iron in her voice.

Sloane nodded. "In return for your master's relic."

Sybale reached into her robes and drew out the statuette. "Do what you promised, and it's yours."

Sloane smiled reassuringly, but there was no mistaking the hungry glint in his eye as the relic was revealed. "I can't remove the nail until you hand over the relic," he said. "You must trust me, Sybale. It's the only way."

Sybale hesitated. What was to prevent this man from breaking his word once he had what he wanted? Then again, what was to stop him from simply taking it from her and throwing her into the street? At the moment, she was as weak as a newborn calf, and Sloane knew it. After a moment's hesitation, she pressed the relic into Sloane's hands.

Sloane accepted the statuette reverently, then turned to Padraig. The red-haired Baed came forward and took charge of the relic with a solemn nod, then quickly carried it from the room. Sybale felt a flutter of uncertainty as it disappeared from sight.

“Good.” Sloane tugged at her aching arm, drawing her toward the table. “Now I will repay the trust that you have placed in me. Climb upon the table.”

Wearily, Sybale tried to heave her aching body onto the table. After several failed attempts Sloane intervened, gripping her by the waist and boosting her the last few inches. “Good,” he said approvingly. “Now lie down.”

Sloane took her by the shoulders and guided her into position, centering her body amid the interlinked symbols. She was placed so that her neck and shoulders hung over the edge of the table. Sloane cradled her bare head in his hands.

“I won’t lie to you. This is going to be hard,” Sloane told her. “There will be a great deal of pain. Can you endure it?”

“It’s all I’ve done for the past year,” Sybale replied through gritted teeth. “Just get on with it.”

At that moment, the door banged open. Figures struggled at the edge of Sybale’s vision. She turned her head just enough to see two men, a wiry Einarr and a hulking, broad-shouldered Lestradae, wrestling a third figure through the doorway.

It was Tanit. Her fine robes were torn, and her pinned hair was askew. She had been gagged with a strip of silk, and her eyes were wide with terror.

Sybale tried to sit up. “What is this—”

“It’s part of the ritual.” Sloane’s voice had lost its warmth. “The nail must be transferred to another, or its magic will kill you. There is no other way.”

“You didn’t tell me—”

Sloane’s grip tightened on her skull, turning her so she stared back up at him. His dark eyes were cold. “We

can stop now if you wish. My men will take you both back to Bomicar's house, and you will never see us again."

Sybale's breath caught in her throat. Tanit's frightened whimpers were the only sound in the room.

It's not for me, she told herself. It's for Damia. For her and her alone.

"Do it," she said.

Sloane nodded to his men. They dragged Tanit across the room and laid her facedown on the floor, positioning her head directly beneath Sybale's. The giant Lestradae knelt down beside her, trapping her head in his huge hands like a vise.

Padraig slipped quietly into the room, taking a position at the foot of the table. He and Sloane locked eyes, and both men began to chant.

The sounds, strange and alien, washed over Sybale. She concentrated on holding herself completely still.

Little by little, her attention was drawn to the silver nail at the base of her skull. It was getting warmer with every beat of her heart. She gritted her teeth against the mounting pain.

Within seconds, the nail was red-hot. The heat radiated through every nerve in her body. A thin wail of agony escaped her lips.

She could feel the nail start to soften like wax. It began to distend, pulled by gravity into a dangling thread of fire. For what seemed like an eternity the molten silver stretched, growing longer and longer until it was as fine as spider's silk.

Then, without warning, the end of the burning filament touched the base of Tanit's skull. Both women screamed at once, sharing the same terrible pain, and then the world went black.

Chapter Seven

The next thing Sybale knew, she was resting on a bed in a dark, musty room. There was no pain at all. Her body felt loose and wrung out, as though she had wakened from a long and terrible fever.

She sat up. Her body responded without complaint, swift and sure despite her weariness. Sybale touched her arms and legs in wonder; tears welling in her eyes.

Before she knew it, she was crossing the room and dashing into the hallway beyond. A kind of savage joy was building in her chest, setting her heart afire.

Sloane and his men were waiting at a table in the common room as she raced down the stairs. Sloane and Padraig looked spent. Still, the handsome Baed rose from his chair and moved to block Sybale's path as she hurried toward the door.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm late for a meeting with Lord Sikarbal," she

growled.

Sloane held up his hands. "Stop. Think for a moment—"

"I've had plenty of time to think," Sybale replied. "More than I can stand. Get out of my way."

But Sloane refused to budge. "Don't be a fool," he said. "You're not even armed!"

Sybale took a step toward Sloane. "Sikarbal's men have plenty of knives," she said. "I'll help myself to theirs."

"And then what? You somehow cut your way through twenty or thirty men, kill the king's son-in-law, and then you and your princess run off into the countryside to live happily ever after? Is that how you think this will end?"

Sybale seized Sloane by the front of his tunic and slammed him against the door. Chairs crashed to the floor as the Baed's men leapt to their feet, but he forestalled them with an outthrust hand.

"I know what she means to you," he said quietly. "Believe me, I do. But this will only end in tears. If you do this—even if you somehow rescue Damia and escape—the palace and the temple will spare nothing to hunt you down. And they will not be so kind when they catch you this time. Damia will suffer, and die, right before your eyes. Is that what you want?"

"What other choice do I have?" Sybale replied, her heart aching.

"You can come with us," Sloane said. "We're heading back to Caith in the morning. That relic you stole from Bomicar is the key to an ancient power that can topple kingdoms. With it, we can free Damia and bend all of Barabi to our will. If you wish, we will cast down Cartomedes and put Damia on the throne in his place. You can rule beside her as her consort, and the kingdom will worship you."

Sloane reached up and gripped Sybale's wrists.

"You trusted me before, and I set you free," he said. "Put your trust in me again, and I will give you everything your heart desires."

The atmosphere around the campsite had changed. Sybale could sense it as she slipped through the dense trees that ringed the top of the hill.

She saw why as soon as she stepped into the clearing. During the course of the day their numbers had more than doubled. Nearly twenty people sat in a terrified huddle a short distance from the campfire, watched over by a half dozen of Sloane's men. The captives were bound hand and foot, their clothes torn and faces bloodied. There were men, women, and children, the oldest about fifty, and the youngest somewhere around fourteen. *Farmers*, Sybale thought, feeling a pang of guilt at the anguish on their weathered faces.

Sloane was sitting by the fire, poring over an old map while he gnawed the end of a chicken leg. He looked up at Sybale's approach, tossing the bone into the fire and licking the grease from his fingers. His eyes glinted wickedly in the firelight.

"Late for dinner again," he observed. "Chicken's all gone, but there might be a turnip or two still in the pot."

"What are they doing here?" Sybale hissed, jabbing a finger at the captives.

"I told you before," he drawled. "We need strong backs to help empty out the vault. I sent some of the lads up and down the trade road looking for volunteers."

"Then why are they tied up? Who beat them?"

Sloane scowled up at her. "I sent the lads searching for volunteers. I didn't say they *found* any," he said with a sigh. "We ended up having to persuade a few."

Sybale glared at him. A change had come over Sloane since the fight at Harrowford Castle. His veneer of charm had worn away, revealing arrogance and callousness

beneath.

Before she could protest further, the sound of hooves and the creak of wagon wheels came drifting up the trail from the bottom of the hill. Sloane smiled, his irritation at Sybale forgotten. "That will be Halvar and Guthric," he said, carefully rolling the map and tucking it in a scroll case. "Now we have everything we need to go after the vault."

Moments later the cultists appeared, driving a rickety wagon around a bend in the trail. Sloane waved, and they gave the horses a flick of the reins, rolling up to the very edge of the firelight. Halvar set the brake while Guthric hopped down, grimacing as he stretched his massive frame.

"It's about time," Sloane said by way of greeting.

Halvar gave the Baed a dirty look. "He had a pair of guards watching the house. Had to deal with them first, didn't we?"

Sybale followed after Sloane, who was walking around to the rear of the wagon. "Who's he talking about?"

The bed of the wagon was covered in a heavy oilcloth. Sloane grabbed a corner and jerked it aside, revealing two bound figures lying side by side. Sybale saw their pale, terrified faces and recognized them at once. It was Rorke and his teenage son.

Sloane gave them a wolfish smile. "Hello, old friend," he said to Rorke. He beckoned to Guthric, who started dragging the pair from the back of the wagon.

Sybale followed in stunned silence as Guthric hauled Rorke and his son over to the fire and dumped them at Sloane's feet. Still smiling, Sloane bent over Rorke and tugged the gag from his mouth.

"Did you really think I wouldn't find out about your little house in the country?" he said smugly. "You're getting predictable in your old age."

"You can't do this!" Rorke sputtered. "For the love of all that's holy, you can't go into the vault! It's madness!"

"Part of what you just said is true," Sloane allowed. "I can't get into the vault. Specifically, I don't fully understand the ritual to unseal the door." He knelt down next to Rorke. "That's why you're here."

The merchant's face went pale. "Sloane, *please*," he begged. "The scepter, it . . . it's not of this world. You can't—"

"I can, Rorke. And I will. Just as soon as you tell me how to perform the ritual."

The merchant stared up at Rorke, his jowls wobbling with fright, and said nothing. Sloane's expression darkened.

"Sybale. Come here."

Feeling a sense of growing unease, Sybale went to stand next to Sloane. "Yes?"

Sloane poked Rorke's prodigious belly. "How long do you suppose we can torture our friend here before his heart gives out?"

Sybale was taken aback. *He's bluffing*, she thought. *He has to be*. "I . . . I don't know," she ventured, trying to sound convincing. "An hour. Two at most."

Sloane shook his head. "I was afraid of that. We'll just have to try another tack." He glanced over at Rorke's son. "Cut off one of the boy's fingers."

The teenager gave a muffled scream, writhing against his bonds. Rorke cried out in dismay. "Don't you touch him! Don't you touch my boy! He's got nothing to do with this!"

Sloane grabbed the man by one of his muttonchops. "He's your son. He has *everything* to do with this." He scowled at Sybale. "What are you waiting for? Cut off his damned finger!"

Sybale's blood turned to ice. The boy looked up at her, eyes wide with terror.

"You can't be serious," she said in a leaden voice.

Halvar stepped forward, drawing one of his knives. "She hasn't got the stones to do it," he said with an evil

grin. "Let me—"

"I didn't ask *you* to do it!" Sloane snarled. "Sybale is going to cut off this kid's finger. *Now!*"

Sybale could feel the eyes of the entire camp on her. Guts churning, her hand drifted to the hilt of one of her fighting knives. She stared at Rorke. "Don't make me do this," she said, but it wasn't clear, even to her, who she was talking to.

Rorke stared at her in horror, lips trembling, and said nothing. Hating the man, and hating herself, Sybale drew her knife and knelt beside the boy. Rorke's son started to protest, his muffled cries rising into a wailing scream as she seized the little finger on his left hand, bent it back, and severed it with a swipe of her blade. The boy stiffened in shock, eyes rolling back in his head. His screams devolved into a drawn-out howl of agony. Sybale tossed the finger onto the grass at Sloane's feet, her gorge rising in disgust.

Still furious, Sloane gave Rorke's whiskers another jerk. "Your boy's young and fit," he growled. "We can work on him a long time if we have to. Tell me what I want to know, or you'll watch him come apart one piece at a time."

Tears were flowing freely down Rorke's face. His gaze leapt from his son, to Sybale, to Rorke, and back again. "Damn you," he said weakly. "Gods damn you all."

"Suit yourself. Sybale, cut off another finger."

The boy started screaming again, tears streaming down his cheeks. Gritting her teeth, Sybale put a knee on his narrow chest to keep him from thrashing, and grabbed his left ring finger.

"I'll talk!" Rorke yelled. "Gods forgive me, I'll talk!"

Sloane gave the merchant one of his dazzling smiles. It had been charming, once. Now it was like a monster putting on a mask. "I knew you'd see reason sooner or later," he said, patting Rorke on the shoulder. Reaching down, he picked up the boy's severed finger and tossed it into the fire. "Now, let's hear about that ritual

while Padraig binds up your boy's hand."

Rorke began speaking at once, the words coming out of him between racking sobs. Sybale cleaned her knife on the grass and staggered away from the fire, her mind reeling.

Sloane came looking for her a few hours later.

She was sitting on a mossy stone at the far edge of the camp's perimeter, nearly inside the tree line. She heard him coming a long way off, and knew him at once by the sound of his tread. She kept her back to him, hiding the anger and revulsion on her face. If he tried to berate her, she wasn't sure what she would do.

The footsteps stopped a few feet away. Sloane spoke in a quiet voice.

"Forgive me."

The words knocked her off balance. Her fists clenched. "You made me torture that boy," she growled, the anger bleeding into her voice. "How could you do that?"

Sloane didn't reply at first. "I . . . I lost my head," he told her, his voice subdued. "I *tried* to get Rorke to talk, but he's always been so damned stubborn. When he refused, I . . . I lost my head."

After a moment, Sloane came up beside her. By starlight, his face was pale, shadowed, as though the life had gone out of it. "You've been with us for only a couple of months. I've been working toward this moment for *years*. I've been to the ends of the earth. I've suffered, and sacrificed, and bled. I've done . . . terrible things. And I can't turn back now, not when there's so much at stake. Surely you understand that."

"What I understand is that we leave a trail of misery and death wherever we go," Sybale answered. "The priestess back at the castle, she said what we were doing was evil."

"Of course she'd say that! She and the people like

her want to keep all the power for themselves!”

“And how are we any different? Aren’t we supposed to be better than them?”

Sloane sighed. “We are. I’ll prove it to you, tomorrow, after we’ve opened the vault. Once we have the scepter, everything changes.”

Tentatively, he reached out and laid a hand on her shoulder. “Trust me. Just a little longer. That’s all I ask. If you can’t do it for yourself, at least do it for Damia.”

The mention of her name brought tears to Sybale’s eyes. “I’ll try,” she said.

“Good enough.” Sloane gave her shoulder a squeeze. “Get some rest. Tomorrow is the big day.”

He turned away, heading back to the fire, leaving her lost in the darkness.

Sleep was long in coming, but when it finally arrived, she dreamt of her princess, and the desert moon, and a garden on the other side of the world.

Damia flitted like a ghost amid the towering palms, silver bells in her hair and at her ankles making sweet music as she ran. Even in sleep, the sound made Sybale’s heart ache with longing.

Sybale ran, swift as a lioness, the grass soft beneath her feet. They raced down the twisting garden path, to the clearing with the scented bower. But they did not fall laughing onto the cushions. This time Damia kept running, around the still pool and into the shadows beyond.

Sybale called after her love, but Damia did not answer. Sybale ran faster, but the princess was as swift as a gazelle, always staying out of reach.

They ran on and on, deeper into a garden that seemed to have no end, until the moon was low on the horizon, and Sybale began to feel afraid. They’d been gone too long. They had to turn back.

Fear gave Sybale wings. She flew after Damia,

calling her name, until suddenly she was close enough to touch.

Damia turned in midstride. Her face was twisted in a grimace of terror. When Sybale reached for her, she threw up her hand, as if to ward off a blow.

A hand without fingers, streaked with rivulets of blood.

Chapter Eight

Sybale awoke at first light, more tormented than before. Sloane and Padraig were already gone, headed west to unravel the illusions concealing the Charn ruin. Halvar and two of the other cultists were cooking porridge over the fire. Though she hadn't eaten the night before, Sybale managed only a couple of spoonfuls before her stomach rebelled.

No one made any move to feed the captives, who sat watching the bubbling kettle with hollow eyes. Sybale filled a couple of bowls and carried them over, ignoring the complaints from Sloane's men. As the farmers passed the porridge around, she went to check on Rorke and his son. The boy was still asleep, twitching fitfully in the depths of a nightmare, his bandaged hand clutched tightly against his chest. Rorke lay beside the boy, saying nothing, his eyes full of hate.

The morning wore on without any word about the ruins. Sybale kept to herself, sitting in the shade of a tree at the edge of the camp and trying to sort out her thoughts. The cultists paced the camp, growing more restless by the hour.

Finally, at midafternoon, Padraig arrived and told everyone to pack up. The Baed's face was flushed with excitement, and when the others didn't move fast enough to suit him he hurried them along with savage imprecations and an occasional boot to the backside.

They'd located the ruin on a hilltop two miles to the northeast. Getting the wagon there required a circuitous route around a mile and a half of steep, wooded terrain. That touched off a heated argument about whether the farmers should follow the wagon or be led to the ruin straightaway, which was finally settled when Sybale pointed out that Rorke's son wasn't capable of walking and would have to be put in the back of the wagon anyway.

Even then, moving wagon and captives along the trail was a slow, laborious process. What should have taken only a couple of hours at most dragged out into early evening. By the time the procession reached the base of the broad hill where the ruins stood, the sun was low on the horizon, and Sloane was nearly apoplectic.

"Break out the lanterns! We're going in now!" He paced up and down the line of cultists and captives, snarling at anyone foolish enough to catch his eye. "The next man who wastes my time gets a knife in his eye. Get moving!"

Torches were lit as the cultists herded the farmers into line. The party, more than thirty strong, made their way up the hill in the last light of the day.

Sloane quickly moved to the head of the file, with Halvar and Padraig close at his heels. Guthric stayed at the rear, making certain no one lagged behind. Sybale followed some distance behind Sloane, torn between the desire to see what was going on and the visceral need to stay as far away

from the Baed as possible.

There was nothing left of the Charn citadel aboveground save for a few fragments that rose like slivers of bone into the overcast sky. The farther up the hill they went, the colder and more oppressive the air became. There were no animal sounds on the hill, no scurrying of rabbits or lilt of birdsong. In fact, there were no signs of life at all, save for stunted trees and thin, listless grass.

Sybale saw no rubble as she climbed, nor any outline of a wall that might have enclosed the citadel. Instead, there was a vast, circular courtyard of paving stones that looked like dark shale but were far more resilient, fitted together so cunningly that they looked seamless in the twilight.

The closer she came to the ruins, the stranger Sybale felt. Half-formed images came and went from the corners of her vision. From time to time the world around her seemed to turn gauzy and insubstantial, as though reality was just a thin screen behind which other shapes were sometimes visible. It gave her a strange sense of dislocation, and it was clear from their expressions that the rest of the party felt it, too. Rorke looked gray around the edges, as though he were being marched to his own death. Only Sloane and Pdraig seemed unaffected. If anything, the uncanny atmosphere only excited them more.

Sloane led the way into the ruins, holding a sputtering torch aloft in his left hand. At the center of where the ancient citadel had once stood, Sybale could see the start of a ramp that spiraled downward into subterranean darkness.

It took only a few moments to make their way to it. A stir went along the line as men readied their weapons. The farmers huddled together like children, some of them bending their heads and praying to the gods. Several of the nearby cultists heard them and chuckled, sharing knowing glances with one another. The sight only deepened Sybale's unease.

Sloane and Padraig paused at the head of the ramp, conversing in hushed tones. Halvar was subdued, peering warily into the darkness below. Then, without so much as a backward glance, Sloane started down. Padraig followed close behind. Within moments the two men were lost to sight.

As the rest of the party began to follow them, Sybale could not shake a mounting feeling of dread. The otherworldly atmosphere grew more oppressive with each step.

We don't belong here, she thought. This place is not meant for us.

Descending into the darkness felt like sinking into the icy depths of the sea. At the last moment, Sybale cast a fearful glance at the sky before the ruins swallowed her whole.

The journey into the depths seemed to go on for hours. Sloane gave explicit instructions for no one to leave the ramp, and after a while the slow, constant trudge, turn upon turn, stole away all sense of distance and time.

Occasionally, at unpredictable intervals, the ramp would reach a landing. Some of these chambers were more intact than others, with towering archways along the walls that led off into abyssal darkness. Sometimes there were statues in niches along the walls of the room. Often the statues resembled the masked figure of the Charn statuette. Other times they were utterly alien, so strange and repellent that they were difficult to look at, much less describe.

At one point, the party came to a halt. From farther up the line, Sybale could hear shouts, and then a hideous, inhuman screech. Eventually, when the line started moving again, she came upon another landing, smothered in a thick blanket of webbing. At the mouth of a funnel-shaped hole near the ramp lay the hacked and oozing body of a spider the size of a pony. After that, Sybale kept her knives in her hands and stayed close to the farmers, who had no means of defending themselves.

Some time later—Sybale could not guess how long—she came around another turn and was surprised to find herself at the entrance to a vast gallery that stretched off into the distance. Towering octagonal columns, carved from the living rock, rose to support an arched ceiling twenty feet above. The floor, made from the same glossy stone as the courtyard, reflected the flickering torchlight as they walked.

It was freezing inside the gallery. Sybale's breath steamed in the dank air. The sense of unreality grew the farther they went, setting her nerves on edge.

After thirty yards, the gallery ended at an octagonal chamber. Towering cadaverous statues in lifelike robes and angular, inhuman masks stood in niches on six sides of the octagon. On the far side of the chamber was what appeared to be a giant octagonal door, incised with arcane symbols and complex runes.

Sloane stood with Padraig before the door, conversing in hushed tones as the party filed into the room. Sloane turned, catching Sybale's eye. His smile didn't quite rise all the way to his eyes.

"There you are. I've been wondering where you'd gotten off to." He beckoned. "Bring Rorke here. I want him to witness this."

Something in Sloane's voice sent a chill up Sybale's spine. She turned to Rorke. The merchant gave her an icy stare and began walking across the chamber. His son, half-delirious with pain, started after him. She stopped him with a hand against his chest.

"Stay here," she warned. "It's not safe."

It took a moment for the boy to register who was talking to him. When it did, he recoiled from her with a curse. Sick at heart, Sybale turned and followed Rorke.

Padraig was stripping off his shirt as they approached, revealing his ritualistic tattoos. Halvar hovered close by, knife in hand, watching Sybale and Rorke intently.

Sybale locked eyes with Sloane. "Promise me that

everyone who walked in here with us will walk out when we're done."

Sloane gave her a jackal's grin. "Are you going soft on me, spear maiden?"

"Promise," she said, her voice like iron. "Or that door stays shut. I'll make sure of it."

Sloane's face darkened. "You're lucky I'm in a charitable mood," he hissed. "Very well. You have my word."

Without waiting for a reply, the Baed turned, raising his hands into the air, and he and Padraig began to chant.

At once, the atmosphere seemed to thicken. The uncanny phrases of the ritual writhed like worms in the gelid air, slithering into Sybale's ears and freezing her soul. The farmers cried out in fear, many clapping their hands to the sides of their heads to shut out the sound. Rorke groaned, swaying on his feet. Halvar eased up behind him, placing a hand on the merchant's shoulder to steady him.

Sloane's voice rose in volume. The world seemed to shift beneath Sybale's feet. As the final words of the rite boiled from Sloane's lips, Halvar slit Rorke's throat from ear to ear.

Blood fountained from the wound, splashing against the surface of the door. The screams from Rorke's son were lost in a cataclysmic grinding of stone as the vault's door split into eight equal parts and withdrew into its octagonal frame.

Sybale was frozen in shock, her mind reeling. Rorke fell to the floor, blood pouring across the vault's threshold. Beyond the door was another eight-sided room. Inside were sealed chests and strongboxes, and curious relics of metal and crystal suspended above plinths of black stone.

At the center of the vault, floating above a rune-carved stone altar, was a scepter fit for the hand of a demigod. It was nearly four feet long and made of a glossy dark gray metal unlike anything Sybale had ever seen. The upper end bulged slightly into a spindle shape, enclosing

a large, oval crystal that pulsed with cold, unearthly light. The air around the relic shimmered, like the ripples in a reflecting pool. Between each ripple, Sybale thought she could see past the world she knew and into another reality beyond.

Shadowy figures, vast and alien, stirred in that other realm. They looked upon Sybale, and they *hungered*.

More screams echoed across the chamber behind Sybale, like a chorus of damned souls. The towering figures surrounding the party were not statues at all. They were *moving*, their ancient robes sloughing away like rotting skin to reveal bones blackened with age. Metal masks fell away, revealing leering skulls with rows of gleaming, pointed teeth.

Sloane's face twisted into a mask of rage. "Rorke tricked us!" he snarled.

Halvar wasn't grinning anymore. He stared at the nearest skeleton with an expression of almost childlike dread. "What do we do?" he demanded.

"Magic won't stop them," Sloane said grimly. "Let them have the farmers! That'll keep them busy until I can get the scepter!"

"You lied to me!"

The words erupted from Sybale. Horror and self-loathing ignited into white-hot rage. "*Everything you told me was a lie!*"

She leapt at Sloane, her knives flashing. The Baed saw her coming and recoiled, but not fast enough. A backhanded swipe raked up the side of Sloane's throat and across his cheek. He fell back with an agonized scream, one hand clapped over his eye.

Sybale staggered as searing pain bit into her right side. Halvar crashed against her, grunting as he tried to force his own knife all the way through her thick leather cuirass. She spun, throwing the Einarr off balance, and gave him a shallow cut on his arm as he staggered into Sloane.

The skeletons closed in from all sides. The cultists

rushed to meet them, hacking at limbs and chopping at knobby vertebrae, but the ancient bones were hard as iron. One man fell, screaming, as bony hands tore into his chest. Another was plucked off his feet like a rag doll, his wail of terror ending with a wet crunch as skeletal jaws bit down on his skull.

Their courage wavering, the cultists were driven back into a panicked knot by the skeletons' inexorable advance. A woman's scream rose to a hysterical pitch as two cultists dragged her from the rest of the captives and threw her into the path of one of the undead guardians.

Sloane staggered away, stumbling in the direction of the vault with Padraig at his heels. Behind Sybale, the woman shrieked as the skeleton tore her apart.

Halvar scrambled to his feet, knives at the ready. He gave Sybale a vicious grin.

She turned her back on him and ran, forcing her way through the press, her blades lashing out at any cultist who got in her path, and weaving through them like an eel in case Halvar chose to throw a dagger at her exposed back. Three of the cultists collapsed in her wake, quickly falling prey to the vault's guardians.

She reached the captives in seconds, handing over one of her knives to the first person she reached. Their feet had been freed so that they could walk, but their hands were still tied. "We're getting out of here!" she shouted over the din. "Follow me!"

The farmers didn't stop to question Sybale's sudden change of heart. She caught two more cultists trying to drag an old man from the group and left them both bleeding on the floor. Sloane and Padraig had made it into the vault. Halvar was shouting at the cultists, trying to get them organized, but no one was listening. Panic had taken hold, and it was every man for himself.

Sybale ran for the gallery. Every step sent a hot spike of pain lancing into her side. The right leg of her breeches was wet with blood.

Guthric was waiting for her. The huge Lestradae stood in the doorway, blocking the farmers' escape, as he'd been ordered to do. His round face was placid as ever, but there was no mistaking the threat of the huge cudgel clenched in his hands.

Sybale picked up speed, appearing as though she intended to smash right through the giant in her path. Guthric grinned, hefting his club.

At nearly the last moment, she reversed her grip on the fighting knife and threw it, embedding the two-foot-long blade nearly to the hilt in Guthric's left thigh.

But the giant didn't topple. He didn't so much as flinch. Instead, the cudgel fell, crashing like a falling tree onto the juncture of her shoulder and neck.

Sybale's head cracked against the flagstones as she was smashed to the floor. The world dissolved in a haze of red and white. Then she felt a viselike grip close around her throat and begin to squeeze.

Guthric lifted her off the ground as though she weighed nothing at all. She blinked, struggling to see through a deepening red haze. Her left arm hung limp at her side. She kicked at the Lestradae, but nothing seemed to faze him. Her knife still jutted from his thigh, bright arterial blood pumping from the wound.

Dimly, she saw a figure leap into view. Rorke's son, screaming with rage, threw himself at Guthric, shoving Sybale's other knife into the Lestradae's belly.

Guthric let out a grunt, his baby face screwing up into a scowl of irritation. Rorke's son tried to pull the knife free and strike again, but the Lestradae sent him sprawling with a swipe of his club. Before the boy could get to his feet the cudgel struck again, turning his head to paste.

The Lestradae staggered. He shook his head dizzily, his brow creasing in a frown. Sybale slipped from his grip. As she lay gasping for breath, the giant turned to her, confused, and then fell over in a spreading pool of blood.

Sybale crawled to Guthric's body and tore her

knives free. Figures were rushing past her, fleeing down the long gallery. Dimly she was aware of rough hands seizing her by the arms and carrying her along with the tide.

Chapter Nine

It felt as if she were floating, riding a warm current carrying her out to sea. It was dark, and there was no moon, but she was unafraid.

From time to time, she could sense another presence. A soft voice sang to her, and soft hands caressed her face.

Damia? She called out, but there was no answer. Fingers touched her cheek, sticky with blood, and she turned away from them, burning with shame.

But she would not be let go so easily. Hands gripped her shoulders, shaking gently.

“Come back. Come back. Wake up.”

Sybale slowly opened her eyes. She was lying on a low bed in a dimly lit room. The windows were shuttered,

morning sunlight glowing brightly through the gaps.

A woman sat on the edge of the bed, her back very straight. Sybale couldn't see her face. "Where am I?" she said fuzzily.

"At a farm, about three miles from the ruins."

The woman's voice was hard as stone. Sybale recognized it at once. "You're the woman from the castle. The priestess."

"You can call me Dierdre." The Baed leaned a little forward, faint sunlight limning dark braided hair and a long, square-jawed face. "I'm Lord Harrowford's daughter, though that doesn't count for much at present."

Sybale grimaced. She tried to sit up, but a wave of dizziness and pain overwhelmed her.

"Don't bother," Dierdre said. Her expression was as cold and unyielding as stone. "You've got a cracked skull, a broken collarbone, and a stab wound in your side. I managed to keep you from dying, but that's all I'm prepared to do until I get some answers."

Sybale licked dry lips. "What do you want to know?"

"Let's start with your name."

"Oh. I'm Sybale."

Dierdre straightened. "All right, Sybale. Now tell me everything else."

And so she did, starting with the battle against the Akkalids, and ending with the fight outside the vault. Dierdre listened, asking few questions and keeping her thoughts to herself. When Sybale was done, the priestess shook her head and sighed. "You were a fool," she said bitterly. "You were a blind, naïve little fool."

"I was in love," Sybale countered. "I still am."

"It amounts to the same thing." Dierdre rose stiffly from the bed and crossed to the shutters, pushing them open to flood the small bedroom with sunlight. Sybale blinked in the sudden glare. When her eyes adjusted, she saw how haggard Dierdre looked. Her face was pale and drawn, and

it was clear from the way she held herself that she was in considerable pain.

"I hurt you," Sybale said, recalling the fight at the castle. "Badly."

Dierdre gave a derisive snort. "You damned near killed me."

"How did you get here?"

"When my father and his retainers fled the castle, I stayed behind," she said. "With Conlan dead, someone had to keep an eye on the ruins. I was the most sensible choice."

"And then?"

Dierdre leaned carefully against the window frame. "I felt it when the illusions hiding the ruins fell," she said wearily. "It was part of the spell Conlan laid on the area. But I was too far away, and you had already made it down into the lower levels by the time I arrived." She sighed. "If I'd known you'd taken a score of my people down there with you, I would have probably done something stupid and tried to rescue them. As it was, I settled in to wait, hoping that if the things living in the ruins didn't kill you, then perhaps the vault's guardians would. Naturally, I was disappointed."

"How did I get here?"

"The farmers carried you out," Dierdre explained. "They claimed you'd saved them. Which is why you lived long enough for us to have this conversation."

"How long have I been here?"

"Not long. Eight hours, more or less. That doesn't leave much time."

"For what?"

"Figuring out what to do now that Sloane has the scepter."

Sybale's heart sank. "How can you be sure he has it?"

Dierdre drew a deep breath. "I can feel it," she said, suppressing a shudder. "It . . . strains the world around it. It

was possible to sense it, even when it was locked away in the vault. Now it's much stronger."

"What is it? What does it do?"

The priestess shrugged. "Conlan told me it was like a siphon. A pinhole in the shroud between this realm and . . . another. Any living thing it touches is consumed, passing a portion of its strength to the scepter's wielder. The rest is drawn through the pinhole into that other realm, like water sucked through a drain. Given enough time—and victims—whoever holds the scepter could become as mighty as a god."

A chill crept up Sybale's spine. "Where is Sloane now?"

"On the hill. They made it out of the vault sometime before dawn. I expect they've been up there licking their wounds and waiting until dark to make their next move."

"Which is?"

"Hunting down you and the others and feeding you to the scepter, of course. Sloane's as hungry for power as the scepter is, and the farmers left a trail a blind man could follow." She glanced at Sybale. "How many men does Sloane have left?"

Sybale closed her eyes and tried to piece together her memories of the battle. Finally she sighed. "I can't say for sure. Halvar and Padraig, probably. Maybe another handful."

Dierdre's expression turned bleak. "That's a handful too many."

"What about your father and his men?"

The priestess scowled. "They're thirty leagues away, being hunted by a small army of Fatherites. Even if I could get a message to my father, they'd never get here in time."

"You can't possibly fight Sloane and his men alone. You can barely walk."

Dierdre straightened, her eyes flashing angrily. "I'll do what I must. I swore a sacred oath to defend this land,

Sybale. When Sloane comes tonight, I'll be waiting for him."

The priestess left the window and made her way to the foot of the bed. "I'll do what I can to heal you. I owe you that much for helping the others escape. All I ask is that you help get the others to safety before nightfall. After that, you're free to go."

"Don't be ridiculous! I'm staying here with you."

"My people—"

"Your people know this country better than I ever could. They don't need my help to get away." Gritting her teeth, she tried to force herself into a sitting position. "This is . . . my fault. My . . . responsibility . . ."

"All right!" Dierdre came around the end of the bed and gripped Sybale's shoulders, gently pushing her back down on the bed. "All right! I've got enough work to do mending your injuries. Don't go making it any harder."

Sybale's head fell back against the pillow. "I'm sorry," she gasped. "I did this. All of this. I have to make it right."

The priestess started to say something, then thought better of it. After a moment, she sighed. "What a pair of fools we are. Now if we only had a few hundred more like us—preferably heavily armed and armored—I might feel a little better about our chances."

The spear had seen better days. It had been in battle more than once in service to Lord Harrowford, and spent the intervening years up in the rafters of the farmhouse, gathering dust, smoke stains, and rust. It was longer and heavier than Sybale was accustomed to, but it would have to do.

The farmers had left just before nightfall. Sybale had worked them hard through the afternoon, preparing the battlefield, but they'd done everything she'd asked without complaint. The chance to strike back at Sloane and his men,

even indirectly, had proved a powerful incentive.

There was a clear sky overhead, and a bright, full moon rising in the east. Sybale tried not to view it as an omen. She had no right to claim Bara's favor, now or ever. But it bathed the fields with its radiance and cast deep shadows around the farmhouse and neighboring barn, a blessing for which she was duly grateful.

The farmhouse was like others of its kind: low, rectangular, with a fieldstone foundation and windows covered by heavy wooden shutters. It was built during a time when border raids from Lestras were common, so it was built to be as defensible as possible. Sybale made sure that there were candles burning in each room, close enough to the shutters so that some of the light would leak through.

There was a fenced-in pasture for cows to the right of the farmhouse. The barn was behind the house and to the left. Sybale crouched in the shadows behind a rain barrel at the right front corner of the house, where she had an unobstructed view of the fields to the southwest. Dierdre, over her vociferous objections, was barricaded inside the farmhouse. Sybale didn't want her outside where she could get in the way once the fighting started.

Sloane's expecting twenty terrified, unarmed farmers and one badly wounded warrior, Sybale had argued earlier in the day. We can use those assumptions against him. Just give me your prayers, and I'll take care of the rest.

Now, as Sloane and his men approached, Sybale wished she'd felt half as confident as she'd sounded a few hours before.

She saw them coming through the fallow fields, with the distant hill at their back. Halvar and three of the cultists were in the lead, eyeing the farm like a pack of hungry wolves. Behind them came Sloane and Padraig. The red-haired Baed was bare-chested and walking a few feet behind his master, moving almost as if in a trance. Behind him came another four cultists, limping and battered, but

still a threat.

Sloane walked the barren earth like a fallen god. The Charn scepter in his right hand was a dull, tarnished gray, swallowing the moonlight that fell upon it. By contrast, Sloane's skin almost seemed to glow with a pale, icy light. Sybale's knife had carved a path of ruin up the side of his neck and across the right side of his face from jawbone to forehead. His right eye was gone, leaving only a gruesome, weeping socket in its place.

He had to be in terrible pain, Sybale reckoned. And yet there was a feverish look of joy on his face, like a famished man being welcomed to a feast.

They made no noise as they approached, but neither did they try to hide themselves. Halvar and the cultists reached the edge of the field and crept warily into the farmyard, their eyes searching the farmhouse's shuttered windows for signs of alarm. Sloane followed impatiently behind, contemptuous of any hint of danger.

Sybale crouched low behind the barrel. She controlled her breathing as she'd been trained to do, listening to the soft footfalls of the cultists come closer. By now, Dierdre would have sensed Sloane's presence and begun her prayer, calling upon the power of her god to sow confusion in her enemy's ranks.

The cultists gathered just a few yards from the farmhouse door. The air grew tense. Sybale's hands tightened on the haft of her spear.

Then a voice spoke. "*Bring them to me.*"

It was Sloane—but at the same time, it wasn't. Or, rather, it wasn't *just* Sloane. It was several voices all tangled together, a mix of curiosity, malice, and pure, primal hunger that turned Sybale's guts to ice.

She straightened slightly, just high enough to peer over the top of the barrel. Halvar and the other cultists were moving aside for Pdraig, who was striding toward the door with a look of dreadful purpose on his face. His lips moved as he began an incantation to blow the farmhouse's door off

its hinges.

The moment had come. Sybale swallowed her fear and rose from behind the barrel. Without a sound, she drew back the heavy spear and let it fly.

She knew the cast was true the moment the weapon leapt from her hand. It sped through the air like a thunderbolt, striking Padraig in the chest. The Baed staggered, blood pouring from his mouth, and then toppled onto his side.

The cultists scattered, shouting in alarm. Only Halvar kept his head. The Einarr crouched, following the arc of the spear's flight back to its source. He locked eyes with Sybale.

"There!" he shouted, pointing with one of his knives. Sybale broke from cover, running as fast as she could for the fenced pasture to her right.

Confused shouts rose in her wake. *Dierdre's prayers must be working*, she thought, as she clambered over the pasture fence. A quick glance over her shoulder revealed that Halvar and his men were sprinting after her, just as she'd hoped.

She cleared the fence and hit the ground running. *Aim for the cow piles*, she reminded herself, tracing a crooked route across the field. She hoped Halvar would think she was trying to throw off his aim.

The four men vaulted the fence just a dozen or so yards behind her. They spread out, looking to pin her against the fence on the opposite side.

The decision was a dire one for the cultists. Two of the men hit the concealed pits within a second of each other. The farmers had dug them deep and lined the bottoms with sharp stakes. Agonized screams rose into the night. The third cultist realized his danger and stopped in his tracks, but Halvar kept going, his teeth bared in a bestial snarl.

Sybale cleared the fence at the opposite end of the pasture and cut back toward the farmhouse, heading for the

barn on the opposite side. Sloane had disappeared, along with the rest of his men.

She raced behind the farmhouse, the screams of the impaled cultists fading behind her. As she reached the far side, two cultists came around the corner, nearly blundering directly into her. Sybale's knives flashed, dropping one of the men to the ground. The other yelled in surprise and lashed out at her with a wild swing of his sword, but she sidestepped the blow and kept going.

Sybale reached the back of the barn in seconds. The rear doors were open just wide enough to permit a single person at a time. She slipped through as fast as she could, stepping carefully over the tripwire stretched taut on the other side.

The barn's front doors were shut, along with the door to the hayloft, leaving the interior of the building dark. Sybale sidestepped to the right, her hand reaching out and fumbling for the haft of the pitchfork she'd left leaning against the rear door.

Halvar was right on her heels. "Come back here, bitch!" he snarled breathlessly. The Einarr darted through the gap and hit the tripwire, sprawling face-first onto the ground.

Sybale never gave him the chance to get up. She drove the tines of the pitchfork through Halvar's back and bore down with all her weight, pinning the thrashing man to the ground.

Warning shouts called out at the rear of the barn. The rest of the cultists were closing in. Sybale let go of the pitchfork and raced across the barn. The front doors were barred, allowing her to focus her attention on the men forcing their way in from the far side.

The two cultists were silhouetted by the moonlight as they forced their way through the gap. One hit the tripwire and stumbled, warning the other of its presence. Sybale readied her knives. She would cut right and deal with the man on that side, putting Halvar's body between

her and—

The barn doors behind her exploded.

Sybale hit the ground hard, landing on her recently healed shoulder. Bright moonlight flooded the interior of the barn. A long shadow stretched across the dirt floor, seeming to reach hungrily for her.

“There you are,” Sloane said in a sepulchral voice.

Fear tightened Sybale’s throat. She rolled to her feet as Sloane loomed before her. This close, she could feel the scepter’s pull, drawing the heat from her body.

Desperate, she lunged at him, both knives stabbing at his chest. To her surprise, Sloane didn’t even try to avoid them. The blades sank deep, piercing lung and heart.

The Baed laughed, a chorus of howling souls, and slammed the scepter into her chest.

Searing cold radiated from the blow. Sybale staggered, her mouth open in a silent scream. Ghostly hands clawed at her soul. Her legs gave out beneath her.

“Clever little girl,” Sloane said. *“You’ve been busy, haven’t you?”*

Sloane’s gaze fell on Halvar’s bleeding body. The Einarr was still alive, though barely. His head raised as Sloane approached. Sybale saw his eyes go wide with terror. The two cultists, who moments before had been howling for her blood, cowered from Sloane like a pair of whipped dogs.

Sloane knelt beside Halvar. He reached out with his left hand, resting it on the man’s head. Halvar stiffened, his eyes rolling back in his head. A tortured wail escaped his lips as his body began to blacken and shrivel before Sybale’s eyes.

“A pity that I’m beyond such assassin’s tricks now.”

She tore her eyes away from the grotesque scene. Her legs thrashed weakly as she tried to stand. When that failed, she rolled onto her knees and started to crawl like a wounded animal over the wreckage of the barn’s front doors.

"I was angry with you before," Sloane said. "Your betrayal . . . wounded me." He chuckled like a pack of hyenas, ghastly and insane. "But I have moved beyond that as well."

Splinters dug into Sybale's hands. She sobbed in frustration, trying to force new strength into her limbs.

"You were useful to me once," Sloane said. There was nothing left of Halvar now but a blackened skeleton. The Baed stood and plucked Sybale's knives from his chest. "For that reason, I will give you the chance to be useful again."

He turned and followed after her with lazy steps, like a cat toying with its prey. *"I want the captives you took from me. I hunger for them. Bring them from the farmhouse and I will feed on them instead of you."*

Sybale crawled past the doorframe, out into the moonlight. Sloane loomed over her, close enough that she could feel the scepter's coldness on her back.

Sloane chuckled again, enjoying her plight. *"It's a simple choice. Just like the one I gave you back in Barabi—"*

The unearthly voice was cut short as the end of Dierdre's staff smashed into his face.

Sloane staggered. The priestess had been creeping along the wall of the barn and caught the Baed by surprise. He shook his head, spitting out fragments of teeth, then rounded on her with a bloody leer.

The scepter lashed out as Dierdre drew back her staff for another blow. It struck the weapon squarely, snapping the gnarled oak in two. Quick as a snake, Sloane lunged forward, seizing the priestess by the throat.

"Well. What have we here?"

Dierdre writhed in Sloane's iron grip, her eyes wide with horror. The sight gave Sybale the strength she needed. Scrambling to her feet, she lurched to the left, crashing into the woodpile stacked against the barn's outer wall.

The woodsman's axe was right where she

remembered. She grabbed the wooden haft with both hands and whirled, praying to the goddess that she wasn't too late.

Sloane had his back to her, savoring his newfound morsel. With a savage cry, Sybale charged. The axe flashed in a gleaming arc and struck Sloane's wrist. His right hand, still clutching the scepter, fell to the ground.

The Baed screamed, this time in his voice alone. Dierdre fell from his grasp, collapsing at his feet.

Mad with fury, Sybale let go of the axe. Without stopping to think, she reached down and grabbed hold of the scepter.

A howling wind filled her mind. The world became a shroud. Shadows moved behind that filmy screen, regarding her with amused, malevolent eyes.

She was thinning, too. She could feel herself being hollowed out from within. A hunger unlike anything she'd ever known before clawed at her soul.

Sloane was screaming. The sound carried thinly across the shroud. He lunged for the scepter, his face livid with madness and hate. As his fingers touched the gray metal a rush of heat swept through her, filling the emptiness that the scepter left behind. The relic gulped at Sloane's black soul, filling her with power. She tasted his malice, his hatred—and his growing terror.

She wrenched the scepter from Sloane's hand as though he were a child. Instantly, the delicious heat vanished, leaving her bones aching and cold. Sloane recoiled from her with a wail of torment. Hungry now, she stalked after him, striking him across the face with the scepter.

Bones crunched. Power suffused her, piquant with the taste of Sloane's pain. On the far side of the veil, the spirits crowded around her, eager for the feast.

Sloane toppled to the ground. She was on him in an instant, the scepter falling again and again. Bones shattered. Flesh tore. Each blow was stronger and swifter than the one before. A chorus of unearthly laughter poured

from Sybale's lips.

It was over in seconds. Sloane was a ruin, consumed down to the marrow. Sybale stood over what was left of his body, shoulders heaving with exertion. The warmth was already ebbing from her limbs.

She cast about hungrily, looking for something else to savor. Her gaze fell on Dierdre, just a few steps away.

Sybale hesitated. No. Not her. Dierdre had saved her life.

But the spirits at her back did not care. They had tasted of her soul once before, and it had been exquisite. They howled for more.

And she was getting cold. So cold, and so hungry . . .

Licking her lips, Sybale started toward Dierdre. As she did, the priestess stirred, raising a hand in abjuration and calling out in an ancient tongue.

An invisible fist blew Sybale off her feet. She landed hard, and the scepter slipped from her bloodstained fingers—

Sybale lay on the packed earth, gasping for breath. Everything hurt, from her head to her toes. Her skull felt hollow, her muscles stiff and frozen.

The spirits were gone, along with their dreadful, gnawing hunger. But the taste of power still lingered on her tongue.

Grimacing, Sybale rolled onto her side. Dierdre was unconscious, her energy spent. The scepter lay on the ground just a few feet away.

There was movement inside the barn. Two cultists emerged from the shadows, their faces pale with fear. They gave Sybale and the scepter a wide berth, edging furtively past her and the bloody wreckage of their leader, then broke and ran, fleeing for their lives across the barren fields.

Before Sybale knew it, she was halfway to the scepter, her hand reaching for the gray metal haft. She couldn't let the men get away. If she drew a little strength

from Dierdre, she could run them down and then—

Fingers an inch from the haft, Sybale froze as she realized what she was doing. Overcome with horror and revulsion, she recoiled from the Charn relic and retreated to Dierdre's side.

She gathered the priestess up in her arms. The scepter waited in the dust of the farmyard, drinking in the moonlight.

"I'm sorry, Damia," Sybale whispered, and felt her heart tear in two.

She turned her back on the relic and carried Dierdre back to the farmhouse.

Chapter Ten

Sybale knelt beside the hearth, tending to the fire. The former owners had left their kettle behind, and she'd put it to good use. Taking up a ladle from the nearby table, she filled a mug with boiling water and carried it into the next room.

She'd opened the shutters to let in the morning air. The day had started out bright and sunny, but a breeze was picking up now, and clouds were rolling in from the west. There would be rain in the afternoon, possibly even a storm. Sybale found that she didn't mind either way.

She'd moved the low bed closer to the windows, so Dierdre could get more sunlight. Her face was pale and haggard, and there were streaks of white in her long, dark hair.

Sybale blew on the liquid in the mug. "How do you feel today?"

Dierdre drew a long breath. “Half dead,” she said in a husky voice. “Which, I suppose, is an improvement from yesterday.”

“I made you tea.” Sybale sat down on the edge of the bed and offered Dierdre the mug. “I have no idea what’s in it. One of your people stopped by this morning and left a packet for you.”

There had been a steady stream of visitors to the farm since the battle, starting with a procession of elderly Baed priests who arrived within hours of Sloane’s death. How they had known to come, Sybale couldn’t guess. Perhaps Dierdre had summoned them, or perhaps they’d sensed the relic as she had. One, an ancient fellow with a hooked nose and piercing eyes, had come into the farmhouse and did what he could for Dierdre, while the others had gathered around the relic outside. Chanting a series of prayers, they placed the scepter into a rune-carved iron chest and carried it away. The priests didn’t say a single word to Sybale the entire time they were there. She had no idea where the relic had gone, and for that she was glad. The yearning for the cursed scepter was fading, but she doubted it would ever truly go away. It would linger in her soul like the tiny scar on the back of her skull.

Dierdre eyed the greenish liquid in the mug and made a face. “Spring nettles and marsh rose. My own people are trying to poison me.”

“There’s also some rabbit. I’m making a stew this afternoon.”

“Oh, gods,” Dierdre groaned. “Now I have to get back on my feet. I don’t want to think about what kind of horrors you could manage with rabbit stew.”

Sybale frowned. “I can’t help it that the temple never taught me how to cook.”

“I’m just teasing,” Dierdre said. “Well. Mostly.”

“Take your tea. If it makes you feel any better, you won’t have to suffer my meals for much longer. Your father is sending some people to take care of you. They should be

here tomorrow.”

Dierdre accepted the mug and sniffed it speculatively. She glanced at Sybale over the ceramic rim. “You’re leaving, aren’t you? Just when I was starting to get used to having you around.”

Sybale sighed. “It’s not safe for me to stay.”

“I told you it was a mistake letting those cultists get away.”

“Forgive me for being preoccupied with keeping you alive.”

“Where will you go?”

Sybale stood and went over to the window. “I don’t know. Skara Brae, perhaps. Maybe farther north. I haven’t really thought about it yet. I just know that I’ve got to balance the scales. Do something to make up for all the terrible things I’ve done.”

“It’s a hard road to travel alone,” Dierdre said, her voice sad. “The cult won’t stop hunting for you, not after what you’ve done. Sooner or later, they’ll find you.”

Sybale, daughter of the desert moon, stared out at the hills of Caith. The ghost of a smile crossed her face.

“Not if I find them first.”

The End