

PILLARS OF ETERNITY



THE RATCATCHER



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THE RATCATCHER

Sagani arched her back and felt something pop. Almost every part of her ached, and the parts that didn't were numb with exhaustion.

The lurid greens of the forest hurt her eyes, and the dank air felt like a hot sigh on the back of her neck. It seeped through her skin and gummed up her joints.

She was coming up on five years on the search for Persoq, and she could count them in the cracking sounds her spine made. If only he'd had the decency to reincarnate someplace cooler.

Sagani felt something cold and damp in her hand. Itumaak nuzzled her fingers, his black eyes staring up at her from a face of bone-white fur.

She looked away, into the searing afternoon glare. "We haven't been this way yet," she said, scratching the fox's head. "Gotta keep looking." The thought drove pins into her knees, but at least it took her mind off her back.

Itumaak whined.

"You have a better idea?" Sagani asked.

The fox yawned and rolled onto his back, squirming and snorting. She rubbed his belly, and her own growled.

Sagani sighed and peered into her pack. She shoved aside poultices, a coil of fraying rope, and a bag of arrowheads, looking for the deer jerky she'd cured last week. She was so intent on finding it—and so certain she'd left it in a parcel next to her water skin—that she cursed aloud when her hand closed around a lump of something cold and hard.

She sighed and pulled the figurine out of her pack.

Between her whitening knuckles was a piece of adra carved in the shape of a bear. It gave off a dim, guttering glow. Just like it had for the last five weeks, when she'd been no closer to Persoq.

The sight of it made the backs of her eyeballs sore.

Itumaak grumbled, thrashing in the grass and flashing his white belly at her.

Maybe she needed to stay in one place for a day or two. To stop looking at things—and thinking about things—that made her whole body sigh with fatigue.

"You win," she said. She could already smell heavy, cloying odors upwind, back toward the road. Dyrwoodan villages were never hard to find. And a tavern with a stocked bar was as good a place as any for a rest.

Sagani and Itumaak passed the first cluster of shabby, mud-thatched houses as the sun staggered below the horizon. She wouldn't have guessed anyone still lived there but for the ripe smells of fresh shit and rotting fruit.

Fifteen minutes later, a couple dozen more houses had popped up along the road like tumors. The villagers peeking out of them didn't look much better.

They should have been her cue to turn around.

Men and women—mostly meadow folk and elves, their skin darkened with soot and dirt—stopped their labors long enough to glare at her, their backs bent under loads of timber or over bare, balding brooms. Sagani hadn't had much reason to visit these roadside hamlets thus far, and she doubted she would again.

For now, she was stumbling toward the promise of a clean feather bed.

She pressed on. The trees withered and thinned. A hunchbacked inn loomed over the mud-colored shops and houses. Sagani headed for it.

She pushed through the door and found her senses assaulted by the dueling odors of whiteleaf and sweat. She saw the same hostile glares she'd received in the street, now glazed with the sheen of alcohol.

At least there was something to look forward to.

She sidled up to the bar, where an elf with stringy blond hair attacked dirty mugs with a dirtier dishcloth.

"Dogs stay outside," he said without looking up.

Itumaak looked cleaner and better-behaved than most of the patrons, but Sagani saw no reason to point that out.

"My fox is drinking, too," she said, sliding a pair of dull coppers onto the bar.

The barkeep glanced up. "Long as he don't bite."

"Never," she lied.

He turned from the abused drinkware long enough to pour a generous draught of something the color of dishwater. Sagani raised it to her lips and swallowed.

It was no fermented milk, but it was cool and moist, which was more than she could say for her heat-swollen tongue.

"Good stuff," she lied again.

The barkeep grunted and returned to flogging the mugs. He was attractive, she realized, in that chiseled, elven way. He was young, too—probably the same age in elven terms that Kallu had been when they were first married.

The thought made her feel deliciously wicked and depressingly old.

She turned and searched the inn for someone who looked worse off than she felt.

The place was just starting to pick up. The door moaned and rasped like a poxed man, filling the inn with bleating locals and

a thickening haze of whiteleaf smoke. They grumbled greetings to one another and found their places at scarred and stained tables, pausing just long enough to shoot Sagani a suspicious leer.

She raised her mug.

Some twenty minutes later, the smoke and the ale had left her feeling pleasantly lightheaded. Almost drowsy. She toasted Itumaak and let the last of the ale wash down her throat.

The fox sniffed the air long enough to realize that no food was forthcoming.

"Itumaak'll have his round now," Sagani said, setting her empty mug on the bar.

The barkeep grunted again, but he was busy watching the young woman who dashed toward the tables, her plump arms hoisting four overfilled mugs above her head.

"Real friendly place," Sagani said.

"We don't get many visitors," said the barkeep.

"Never would've guessed."

He filled her mug and plunked it down. The look on his face would've curdled milk.

"Why do you wear that stripe on your face?" he asked.

"Brings out my eyes." She took a gulp of the ale. It tasted better than the last mugful.

The barkeep smirked. "Guess you've never heard of facepainting."

"You don't make it sound like a good thing."

"It's a Glanfathan thing. You heard of them?"

"Good hunters. Not keen on visitors, either," she said.

"And most folk around here ain't keen on them."

"You make it sound personal," Sagani said.

He set his jaw and pursed his lips. "Folk this close to the border have a tendency to pick up some of their sacred relics. And that has a tendency to upset them." He gave her a long, searching look.

Sagani had heard enough travelers' tales of hostility between Dyrwoodans and Glanfathans, but she was ready to ask the barkeep about it just to hear something other than the slurred, belching chatter behind her.

That was when the door banged open and spewed forth two snarling, spitting men and a scowling woman.

They turned to Sagani and pointed. "There she is!"

The trio marched toward her. She kept a tight grip on her mug.

"Heard she was prowling through town," the woman said. "Didn't think she'd be fool enough to hang around here."

"What's the problem?" Sagani asked.

"Don't try that with us, you lying hut-dweller!" One of the men leaned toward her, his finger pointed like a dagger.

Itumaak's fur needled. He rose, growling.

"Pardon my fox," Sagani said. "He takes insults real personal."

The woman turned to the barkeep. "Thanks for keeping her here. Even old Hildemaeg deserves justice."

The elf only raised his pale eyebrows.

"Found Hildemaeg half an hour ago in Yfaldr's field," the woman said. "All cut up by some hunter's knife. Blood on her clothes ain't even dry." She twisted her neck to look at Sagani. "Then we hear some hut-dweller's been slinking around."

Sagani cursed. She was too tired to deal with this.

"Couldn't have died more than an hour ago," the first man said.

"Real shame, then." The bartender rolled the words around in his mouth like a plug of svef. "'Cause she's been here for two."

Everyone, Sagani included, gaped at him.

"Was a Glanfathan knife that got Hildemaeg," the woman said.

"Don't doubt it," the bartender said, flicking his rag around inside another mug. "But she's no Glanfathan."

The angry trio glared from the young barkeep back to Sagani. Finally, one of them scuffed his boot against the dirty tiles.

"You just see to it she don't stir up no trouble," he said. He and his companions retreated, throwing parting glances like table scraps as they disappeared through the door.

"Appreciate the good word," Sagani said. She scraped another coin across the bar.

The barkeep made a rasping noise as he snatched it up. "Wasn't doing you no favors. Murderers are bad for business is all."

She looked around and saw a dozen pairs of eyes still appraising her with suspicion and hostility.

"Then maybe I oughtta take a room now," she said.

"Your fox..."

"He won't leave a mess. And he doesn't have fleas."

The barkeep gave her a twisted grin. "Not yet."

She should've left another coin on the bar and disappeared back into the woods, but the desperate, nauseating scent of the place was already in her lungs and on her skin.

Or maybe it was just the whiteleaf.

The room was every bit as shabby as the rest of the town, but when the sky began spitting raindrops, she was thankful for the roof over her head. Once she found the spots that didn't leak, anyway.

Sagani checked the lock and spread her bedroll in a dry corner, far from the lumpy, abused mattress that came with the room. She stretched out, Itumaak curling up in the hollow of her hip, and waited for sleep.

But it had been a few months since she'd slept indoors. The floorboards seemed to creak and sag with her every movement, and the sounds of barroom revelry drifted through the walls.

Sagani opened her eyes to find Itumaak already staring at her, his head resting on her belly.

"Don't look at me like that. This was your idea."

She could already feel the nighttime hours slipping away like water in her hand. She took a crooked nub of a candle from the bedside table and brought it to her corner of the room. She dug through her pack for a dog-eared and mud-flecked book detailing the increasingly impossible adventures of Amado Vucchio, the fictional Vailian detective.

Yet while she skimmed pages about Amado's midnight chases, daring escapes, and uncanny conclusions, her mind drifted to visions of a withered old woman scored with stab marks.

Aurochs' shadow. She'd only wanted a pint and a good night's sleep.

She upended her pack, hoping for a roll of whiteleaf.

What tumbled out was the adra figurine, still as dark as a midwinter morning.

Itumaak sneezed and buried his muzzle beneath her back.

Sagani shoved the figurine back into her bag while an itch wormed along her scalp. She was miles away from rest and farther still from Persoq, wherever he might be.

He wasn't getting any closer, but she could feel herself wearing thin as an old coat. She needed something to keep herself busy before she tugged her own seams apart.

Sagani glanced out the window. The moonlight was as pale and bright. Not a night for sleeping, anyway.

She took her bow, her hunting knife, and her room key and padded back into the bar, Itumaak in tow. The young elf was gazing at the barmaid again, but he showed no sign of surprise when Sagani sauntered over.

"No refunds on the rooms," he said, looking her over.

"Just out for a stroll," she said. "Fact, I was thinking you could give me directions."

"Best I could suggest is back the way you came." He jerked his chin in the direction of her room. "Town ain't exactly friendly toward outsiders these days."

"Nor toward locals, way things sound."

He cocked his head.

"I was wondering about this lady that got killed. Hildemaeg."

He shook his head. "You heard as much as I did."

"Who was she?" Sagani asked. She slipped another coin onto the bar.

He looked at it and sighed. "Village ratcatcher. Trapped moles, rats, and any other vermin 'round here. Was about the only company she could keep."

"She sounds useful," Sagani said. "Who'd want to kill her?"

He laughed. "Who wouldn't? Folk around town didn't spend much time with her, and if you'd met her, you'd see why." He glanced at her face and shook his head again. "But I don't know anyone who would've had a special reason to want her gone."

“Know where she died?”

He squinted this time. “What’s this about? I swore to those folk that you weren’t no Glanfathan hunter.”

Sagani grinned. “I’m no Glanfathan. But I’m a damn good hunter.”

Fifteen minutes later, Sagani and Itumaak stood in a barley field bleached in moonlight.

The dirt at her feet had already been stamped and kicked by too many pairs of boots. Half the town had probably come to gawk, and no surprise there. Wasn’t much else to see as far as she could tell.

She traced a widening spiral around the epicenter of the foot traffic, looking for something different: thin-soled hunter’s boots, the skidding tracks of someone fleeing the scene, something...

Itumaak growled. A twig snapped.

Sagani turned. A man crouched forty feet away, bow drawn and arrow nocked. She got a look at his sloppy grip and felt like an idiot for letting him sneak up on her. He probably couldn’t hit a dead ogre, but no sense risking it.

“Hail,” she called, raising her own empty hands in greeting. “You must be Yfaldr.”

He hesitated long enough that she knew she’d startled him. “You that Glanfathan everyone’s talking about?” he called.

“I’m from Naasitaq,” she said.

“Nasi-what?”

She kept herself from rolling her eyes. “I’m not Glanfathan. But I heard about your ratcatcher.”

He recovered some of his courage and squared his hips to show it. “That give you the right to trespass on someone else’s property?”

"If this is your field, I'm thinking you want to know how someone was murdered in it."

"Was one of them hut-dwellers." He startled again, bunching his shoulders and pulling the bowstring tighter.

"I can bet you it wasn't."

"Horseshit."

"Show me the body." It was just a hunch, but she'd learned to trust her hunches. Besides, it got him to lower his bow.

He thought about it. Finally, he spit into the dirt. "This way."

Sagani followed her guide back toward the greasy glow of town. He was younger than she'd first thought, but the moonlight did him no favors. The sallow light highlighted every crooked angle in his face, and grit underlined his sun-ripened wrinkles.

He cast a quick glance at Itumaak, who was the picture of innocence.

"Odd time go nosing around," the man said.

"Yet here you are."

He grunted. "Guess I wanted to keep a better eye on things."

Sagani followed in silence until they reached a stone building lit by a flickering torch. The place looked like a heap of rubble that had sagged into its present position over a century or two. The doorstep was spattered with mud, and the dirt patch in front of it had been trampled to a hog wallow.

A skull grinned from the keyhole.

Yfaldr's knuckles had barely brushed the door when it swung open to reveal a young woman with a wild mess of red hair.

The farmer cleared his throat. "Sygfald here?"

The girl wiped at her eyes. "Said his joints was acting up again. Had his hands wrapped and everything." She stepped back. "C'mon, don't just stand there."

Sagani followed the other two into the temple and immediately began coughing. Incense clouded the air.

"It's better than corpse stench," the girl said.

And it was by a long shot.

The body had been laid out on a bier in the back of the temple, surrounded by skulls, candles, and billowing plumes of incense. Hildemaeg looked to be about sixty, though it was hard to tell through the waxy cast of death.

Sagani looked from the corpse to the girl. "She came in early this evening?"

"Not three hours ago."

"Anyone handled her? Embalmed her?"

The girl raised her hands as if fending off an invitation. "I'm just the acolyte. Look her over yourself if you want."

Sagani pulled back the linen cloth that covered the woman from the shoulders down. Thankfully, only the barest effort had been made to clean the body—Hildemaeg was still dressed in the same stained tunic and trousers that she had apparently died in. Mud and grass clung to the dead woman's shoes, and her fingernails were black with dirt.

Sagani raised the tunic, and a cry of protest burbled in Yfald's throat.

"Here now, that ain't proper," he said. He turned to the acolyte for support.

But the girl just pulled a roll of whiteleaf from her bodice and lit the pinched end on one of the funerary candles.

The farmer shook his head and turned to the crooked walls in appeal.

While the two of them were distracted, Sagani ripped a scrap from the woman's clothes.

Then, she turned to the cuts. They were ragged and sloppy, and not the work of any hunter fit to hold a knife. As for the knife—

"Just like I told you," Yfaldr said. He'd overcome his revulsion enough to point to the wounds. "Work of a savage Glanfathan hunter. Ones on her back are even worse."

"And like I told you," Sagani said, "the person who left these wasn't used to cutting live flesh. And the knife they used wasn't, either."

"How can you—"

"Because they're all too shallow. That's why there's so many of them. It's hard to slice a body when it's moving and harder still when you're holding a knife meant for chopping vegetables."

The acolyte held the whiteleaf under her nose and took a deep breath. "You sound like one of those Dunryd snoops."

Yfaldr did a double-take at Sagani. He looked like he was chewing on that now. But he frowned at the body. "I've seen enough tonight."

Sagani yawned as the man slouched toward the door. The incense had begun to clog her head and darken her vision. Of course sleep was creeping up on her now, just when things were getting interesting.

But something occurred to her as the door clanked shut behind the farmer, and she turned to the acolyte.

"Hey, what was—"

But the girl looked to be asleep on her feet, swaying slowly while her eyelids fluttered.

Just as well. She could always pick back up after a few hours of shuteye.



When Sagani shuffled back to the inn, she found the bar deserted. The tables were wet with ale and gravy, and the floors weren't much better. A couple of the benches were overturned. It looked like the patrons had gotten into a food fight, which seemed as good a use for the stuff as any.

She stumbled toward the hall, listening to the clack of Itumaak's nails behind her.

She found her room and felt her pockets for the key.

The door opened in front of her.

Sagani looked up and saw the elven barkeep, his pale eyes wide with surprise. The sight jolted her back to wakefulness.

"Evening," he said at last.

Itumaak growled.

He looked at the fox. "Thought you said he didn't bite."

"He's just asking questions," Sagani said.

The barkeep swallowed and scratched his nose. "There was some trouble earlier, and a few of my regulars got rowdy. Seems folk were more upset about Hildemaeg's murder than I thought." His eyes narrowed. "I was breaking up a fight, so I didn't notice at first that a couple of 'em had slipped into your room."

"Maybe it's a good thing I went out, after all," Sagani said.

The barkeep glanced back down at Itumaak. The fox's teeth were still bared.

"Good for someone," he said. He turned to squeeze past.

"Find anything?" Sagani asked his retreating back.

“Only the rats. You’ll wanna be careful what you leave in the open.”

So much for the last of the deer jerky. She pushed her way into the room.

The sheets were tangled on the bed, and the contents of her pack had been dumped in the corner.

She was still sorting through her arrowheads when she heard Itumaak whine from the other side of the bed.

He was snuffling at something wedged between the mattress and the bedframe.

She took the knife and tucked it away.

With that, she went through her pack to see if there was something she could salvage from the jerky. But as she dug through her belongings, she didn’t find any.

But that’s not what worried her.

The adra bear was missing, too.

She cursed. Panic was seizing her nerves and filling her head with a dizzying, liquid warmth. It was something she hadn’t felt since she was a child; none of the long, desperate hunts or the white-knuckle standoffs against the great wolves and cats of Naasitaq had driven her to this.

The worst those could bring was death. But this—losing her one feeble lead on the man she’d been sent to find—could mean exile for the rest of her life.

Any hope of sleep deserted her with that thought.

She tore the room apart and nearly ripped her pack in two looking for it while Itumaak paced by the door. But after fifteen minutes of frantic searching, she had to conclude that it was gone.

She marched out of her room and back toward the bar and the lone door next to the kitchen. It was her best guess for the barkeep’s

quarters, but she didn't care if she was wrong. She pounded loud enough to wake the dead.

A young woman answered after half a minute, bleary-eyed and dressed in a long, wrinkled shift. Sagani recognized her as the girl the barkeep had been ogling earlier in the evening.

"I'm looking for the barkeep," Sagani said.

"Cafmund? He lives near the well. About five minutes down the road." The girl rubbed at her eyes. "Something the matter?"

"He said there was trouble here earlier tonight."

"Wyfla and Maedegar saw the bottom sides of their cups one too many times and got into it, like they usually do. Cafmund and Sygfald broke 'em up and sent everyone home after that."

The girl's tone, casual and unruffled, rang dissonant with the barkeep's earlier sense of urgency. And something about the other name stuck in Sagani's head like an off-key note until she remembered her visit to the temple.

"Sygfald? The priest?"

"Uh-huh." The noise was more yawn than agreement. "Takes care of a lot 'round here. Bought new seed stock after last year's drought, and he's fixed up half the homes since this season's rains—"

"Cafmund said someone broke into my room earlier tonight. You know anything about that?" Sagani felt the answer creeping up on her even as she asked the question, but she needed to hear it from the girl.

That woke her up. Her eyes snapped open, and she blinked at Sagani and Itumaak as if seeing them for the first time. "I was working till everybody went home, and I didn't see anything of the sort. You missing something?"

But Sagani was already stalking toward the door, and she waved for the girl to go back to bed. And as the door clicked shut behind her, it occurred to Sagani that, even though she wasn't the

murderer these folk were looking for, she would fill someone with arrows if that's what it took to get Persoq's adra figurine back.



Sagani and Itumaak stole back to the ramshackle temple. It was a good thing they'd gone earlier that night, because the clouds that hid the moon left the streets almost completely dark.

And that was perfect for her present needs.

She tiptoed alongside the building, avoiding the mud pit and the noisy door. The windows were cracked, and it wasn't long before she heard voices.

She recognized one of them.

"-never would've happened if we'd moved the stash." It was Cafmund, the elven barkeep, and his voice was a steel-edged whisper.

"I agreed! We should've kept it in the inn, where you meet with all—"

"Where everyone in town goes to drink and where Macga's always poking around?" Cafmund said. "No, we should've kept it here." Sagani heard a soft thump as he slapped a table or desk.

"Then everyone would have wondered why traveling merchants were suddenly finding their piety," said the second speaker.

Sagani risked a glance through the window and saw a middle-aged man with broad shoulders and brown hair streaked with gray. It had to be Sygfald.

"Things couldn't have ended up any worse," Cafmund said. Accusation sharpened his tone.

"I never meant for this! But she came to me and I didn't know what else to do. I—"

"You kept the knife and then passed it on to me." Cafmund's voice rose. "Dunno whether that makes you an idiot or a coward."

"You said you could get rid of it." Now, Sygfald's voice thickened with anger. "What should I have done? Thrown it in the field for someone to find?"

"Quit your griping. I've taken care of it."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Sygfald asked.

"Forget it. You've never wanted to know how this side of the business is handled. That's why you've got me." Heavy footfalls clopped across the room.

Sagani backed away from the window and retreated across the street. She'd heard enough.

She pictured Hildemaeg's corpse: sliced with stab wounds, her clothing stained with dirt and blood. There had been dirt under her nails, too.

She thought back to the field where the body had been found. Hildemaeg had found the stash, and whatever it was, she'd found it out there. A story began to form in Sagani's mind.

She and Itumaak returned to the field. When they reached it, Sagani took the scrap she'd ripped from Hildemaeg's clothes and held it out for Itumaak to sniff.

"All right, boy. Where'd she go?"

The fox's ears moved forward and his bushy tail stood erect as he studied the scent. Finally, he put his nose to the ground and followed it to the trampled earth where the body had fallen. He looked back, his eyes bright and his tongue lolling from his mouth.

"Where else?" Sagani asked.

He sniffed the dirt and traced invisible trails, darting forward and then lingering in place as he worked. Sagani followed.

After a few dozen yards, Itumaak stopped again, wagging his tail. Sagani lit the candle nub that she'd taken from her room and found Itumaak perched upon a bare mound of dirt not far from a withered elm tree. It was only a small rise, but it looked like the kind of thing to catch the notice of Hildemaeg—or anyone else looking for vermin.

"Let's take a look, Itumaak."

The fox leaned into the mound and started digging. It was fast work, especially since the soil was still loose from whoever had been here last. It took less than a minute for Itumaak's claws to strike something else.

Sagani bent forward. One corner of a canvas sack peeked out of the ground, and whatever was inside it was hard. And angular.

"Keep going," Sagani said.

Itumaak dug faster, and within a couple of minutes, he'd uncovered enough of the sack for Sagani to slice it open.

What she saw inside was equal parts copper, adra, and conundrum.

Sagani gasped through her teeth. She couldn't move it by herself. More importantly, she couldn't incriminate Sygfald and Cafmund by herself, either. She needed someone else who might also have an interest in knowing the nature and the whereabouts of the stash.

And, looking up, she saw dim light coming from a farmhouse in the distance.

She blew out the candle and started walking.

The curtains were drawn, but Sagani could smell the smoke of a hearth fire as she reached the house. In another time and place, it would have seemed welcoming. She told Itumaak to stand back and knocked on the door.

Yfaldr answered, scowling. He was still dressed, and he looked like he'd been up all night.

"What do you want?" he asked. He wasn't armed as far as she could tell.

"I wanted to show you a cache of Glanfathan artifacts hidden in your field."

"Kind of nonsense is this now? I don't mess with those hut-dwellers' trinkets."

"I figured," Sagani said. "That's why I'm telling you about it."

He hesitated, clearly caught between suspicion at her claim and confusion as to what it meant for him. "Then why—"

"'Cause I'm thinking you wanna know who it was that killed a woman and buried a small fortune on your property."

A little croak of protest died in his throat. Finally, he shrugged. "Lead the way."

When Sagani showed him the stash—a muddle of vessels, totems, and several incomprehensible contraptions—he let out a low whistle. "You're saying someone meant to sell all of this? Why'd they leave it here?"

The ruined elm tree rose like a skeletal hand. "Easy to find, close to town," Sagani said. "I'm thinking the folk behind this had a long-term arrangement. The folk who find this stuff leave it here, and the ones who sell it dig it up. Meanwhile, someone local gets a nice cut."

Yfaldr scratched his head, still staring at the glittering treasures. "But what's this got to do with Hildemaeg?"

"She was just looking for molehills. And when she came across a big one, she figured you'd taken to smuggling artifacts."

He shook his head again. "But I—"

"Didn't. I know. But you seemed like the obvious culprit, and so she ran to the most trustworthy person in town. Sygfald. And when she brought him here, he—"

Yfaldr raised his hands. "I could believe it of a lot of folk, but Sygfald's done more for this village than anyone."

"A real saint of a man. He's been fixing homes, saving crops," Sagani said.

Yfaldr spat. "You got any proof 'gainst the man besides his charity?" His face was growing red in the flickering candlelight.

Sagani held up the knife she'd found in her room. It was simple, with a single-edged blade and a plain black grip.

He flinched from her. "You—"

"Someone left this in my room," she said. "Thinking to frame me if they couldn't get rid of me. But you compare it to the cuts on Hildemaeg, you'll see it's the right size and shape to have made them."

"But anyone—"

"And if you look at Sygfald's hands, you'll see cuts on his fingers and palms. Knife like this has no guard. So when it hit bone..." She drew her hand across the blade.

Yfaldr didn't look convinced, but he looked too tired to argue. "I'll wake the others," he said.

At least she wouldn't be the only one still up.



The sky was a sickly pink when Yfaldr and a dozen other villagers knocked on the temple door. Sygfald opened it, fully dressed but making a good show of surprise. The knife matched Hildemaeg's wounds and the deep cuts on Sygfald's right hand.

The priest said nothing.

Cafmund, on the other hand, was much more talkative when the mob reached his door. He cursed and spat, and when he saw Sagani, he pointed in a rage.

“Check her room! Trouble didn’t start until she showed up. Bet you anything she’s hiding something.”

Then he saw the knife, and his fury cooled to a smolder.

“That’s got nothing to do with me. All you’ve got is her word that I was in her room.”

“Actually,” Sagani said, “you’ve got something of mine.”

She looked to Itumaak and pointed at the open door. The fox sniffed and rummaged, and as a minute stretched into five, she felt her palms grow moist and heard the impatient shuffle of feet behind her. A murmur worked its way through the back of the crowd. Persoq’s bear was the last piece of the puzzle and the one that mattered most where she was concerned. If Itumaak didn’t—

But then the fox reappeared, a glowing figurine in his mouth. Sagani sighed while the rest of the villagers gasped.

Something had wound taut in her throughout the night, and it was finally beginning to uncoil.

She turned to Cafmund, who was watching the scene with a kind of resignation. “I told you I wasn’t Glanfathan,” she said, taking the figurine back.

His eyes were red with exhaustion when he turned them on her. “And I told you to stay out of this mess,” he said.



Macga, the girl, was frying sausages by the time Sagani returned to the inn. She offered one to Sagani, but Sagani found that the smell had already cured her of her hunger.

“Quite a night,” Sagani said, taking a seat at the bar anyway. Itumaak curled up next to her stool and fell asleep.

"The others haven't figured out what to do with Sygfald and Cafmund yet," Macga said.

"Trafficking in Glanfathan artifacts is a crime."

"Says the duc, but he's in Defiance Bay."

"So's murder, come to think of it," Sagani said.

"It's an even chance they'll hang or go free for that one." Macga peered over the oily smoke rising from the pan. "Folk liked Sygfald and Cafmund a lot more than they did Hildemaeg."

"Bet they liked Sygfald's money quite a bit, too," Sagani said.

Macga looked back at the browning meat. "Point is, you're not going to be a popular lady around here."

"Shame. I'm a real softie once you get to know me."

Macga blushed. "I know this is a sorry deal after what you done for us. I'm just telling you how it is."

"It's fine. I know what happens to unpopular ladies in this town." She gathered her things and left with Itumaak in tow. It was still too early for most of the town to be up—as good a time as any to leave.

As she trudged out of the village and felt the packed dirt give way to grass beneath her feet, a familiar ache traveled up her legs and left her steps clumsy and leaden. Yesterday, it had made her think of soft beds and cool draughts, but now, it brought a pleasant sigh to her lips.

When she found a shaded copse away from the road, she dropped her pack and all thought of adra bears, dead elders, and sacred duties. She'd earned her rest for now.

END