

THE SUNDERED ISLE

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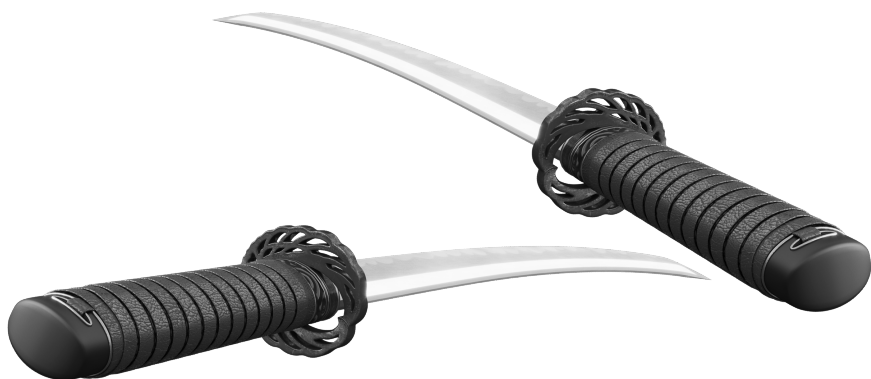
The Blackmoon Shards

The Sundered Isle

WARDER

III

THE SUNDERED ISLE



ELDON
THOMPSON



THE SUNDERED ISLE
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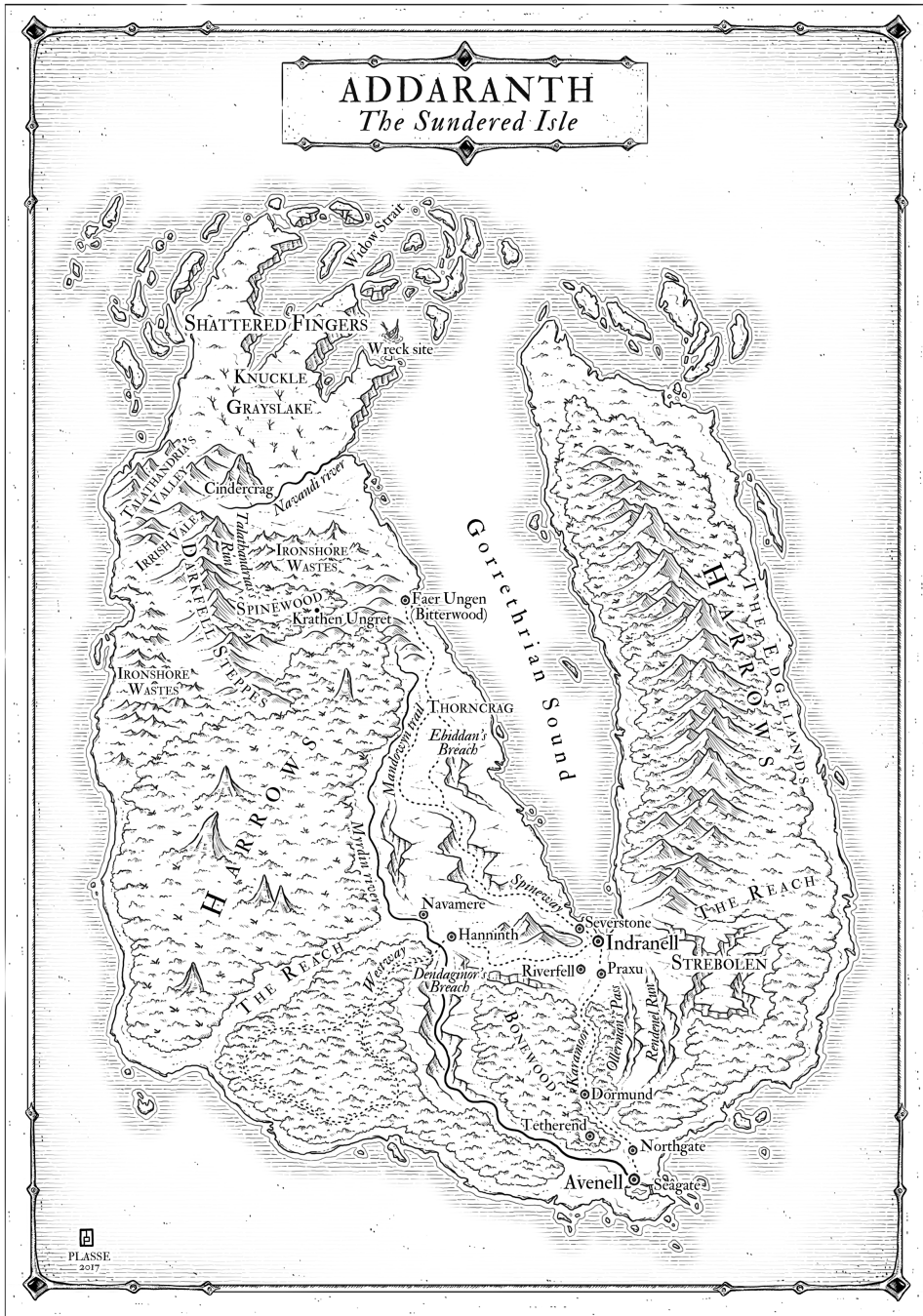
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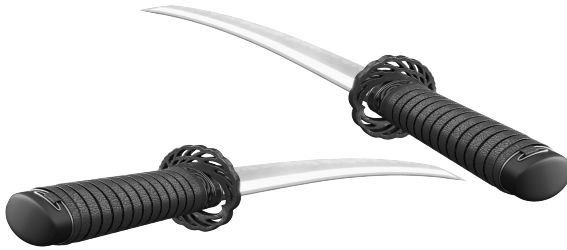
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ADDARANTH

The Sundered Isle



PROLOGUE



THE SCREAMS INTENSIFIED as she descended along the scabrous corridor. A chorus of agony and desperation. Of mewling pleas punctuated by shrill howls and spine-rattling shrieks. Echoes clawed at the tunnel walls as they scabbled past. Flush with despair. Urgent with need. Seeking escape, only to wither in the coring void.

A song of torment.

Succulent to the ear.

She turned the corner at the base of a crude stair. Dathus and Horvus, together serving sentry, stiffened as she entered their view, sable faces gleaming in the torchlight like burnished blackwood. Horvus moved to open the ironbound door they warded. Dathus flattened himself to one side. Both clapped fist to heart and dipped chin to chest as she brushed by, her brisk passage stirring the flames ensconced along the walls.

Through the door, a stench assailed her. Of burning hair and seared flesh. Of sweat and blood and entrails. Of rancid hopes and festering fears. Deeply, she inhaled.

The aroma of conquest.

As she neared the bank of cells, the song reached its crescendo. Wails and bellows underscored now by plaintive moans and pitiful whimpers. Amid these chords of frailty and cowardice, the means of

their suffering. The snap of bone. The hiss of hot iron. The clangor of spikes and chains. The wrench and squeak of rope and pulley. Harsh, discordant, yet all part of the same tune. Strains of a melody that hailed her triumph, that sent chills of victory worming through her flesh.

In a cavernous chamber to her right, Baccus and Pirrus were tending their garden of human wreaths—Addaran landsnakes lashed naked to spinning wheels, struck by hammer until their broken limbs were mashed and twisted in grotesque angles amid the spokes, then left to writhe and moan in a withering torment meant to endure for days.

At this particular moment, Baccus carried the hammer, while Pirrus inspected the wilted victims. Watering those in need. Sussing out the dead by slapping at mangled appendages or tugging at their hair. Few resembled human form.

“This one’s dead,” he announced, when a senseless wretch, unspeakably gnarled and knotted, failed to respond.

“Ivory fist says he’s breath in there yet,” Baccus argued.

“Wagered.”

She paused, observing as Pirrus withdrew from the tangled ruin, and Baccus hefted his hammer. The strike splintered an already pulverized forearm—and raised a ragged yowl from the victim.

Baccus grinned fiercely, while Pirrus frowned and shook his head. In doing so, he caught sight of her—quickly nodding and thumping a sharp salute. Baccus rounded and did the same.

“You owe him a fist,” she said.

Pirrus bowed again. “Yes, my kiros.”

“Half pay for dead wreathes,” she reminded them, and left them to their work.

“Overlord,” they replied in unison, offering a parting salute.

Venturing forward along the central hall, she found more of the same. Chambers to either side filled with Addarans put to various forms of torture. Some were being actively tended with saws, peelers, screws, or vices. Others had been abandoned to cradles or collars, some of which teased the victim with survival so long as their own stamina held. Still others had been encased with insects, crabs, or agitated vermin, to be slowly stung, torn, or gnawed to death.

Several were being actively interrogated. Others lay beyond ques-

tioning, their horror persisting merely to be witnessed by others. Regardless, each treatment seemed crueler than the last, the agony of each victim more severe. As she had commanded. A menagerie of pain. One to fill this hole with every conceivable stench and ear-splitting cry. Burns, bruises, lacerations. Shattered bones and severed appendages. Men awash in one another's blood, bowels, and vomit, or slathered in their own.

But it was their gazes she sought, from which she derived a richer pleasure. Red-veined eyes shuttered by bruising or swollen with tears. Where she could peer past the carnage and into that purer well of raw anguish. Where their prayers for death burned with increasing fervor.

And went unanswered.

Deeper within the den, she found at last her chief inquisitor, overseeing Samrus's application of a knee splitter. The landsnake strapped to the chair dared look to her arrival in hope.

"Thrassus," she said. "I would see the general."

"Overlord," he acknowledged, and rose to lead the way.

"Proceed," she bade Samrus, and smiled as the pathetic hope curled upon the snake's pale face.

Overwrought. Petty. Unnecessary. She cared not how others might describe this effort. A long time had she and her people sought retribution against their Addaran betrayers. Generation after generation, over the course of one hundred and ninety-two years. Here at last, victory. The annals would record that it was she, Sabrynne Stormweaver, Great Grendavan the Eighth, who had finally restored the Grenarr to their ancestral homeland. How she had conceived and then executed a daring, multifaceted plan that had repaid the landsnakes' treachery and seen them driven from their stolen nest. The city of Avenell was now hers, and with it, the heart of the isle of Grenah.

As such, she had no intention of repeating the mistake the Addarans had made by merely driving her people from the isle's shores. Her forces had held the city for more than two weeks now. But not two hours had marked its fall before she had turned eye to those who might later rally against her.

Determined not merely to supplant her hated enemies, but to eradicate them.

“Have we gleaned nothing of value?” she asked of Thrassus, as he plucked a lantern from the wall and led her even deeper into the torture grounds.

“Only chaff,” her hulking inquisitor huffed. “Kernels aplenty, but naught more than empty husks.”

Sabrynne nodded, seeing no reason to question his assessment. She hadn’t charged him with oversight of this task for either his stomach or imagination—formidable as they were—but for his uncanny ability to measure and sift truth from lie. His previous reports had established already the relative ease with which these landsnake tongues were loosened. But the whole of their hissing and wagging had thus far proved contradictory and disjointed. Most of these rags and wretches simply lacked the information she required, and so offered up tales in the desperate hope of appeasing their tormentors.

“Word from Grenathrok?” Thrassus asked.

“East of rudder. Barkavius and the fleet are en route.” *Having overcome some minor complications*, she might have added, as detailed in the steward’s message. Regrettable, in some respects. But the overall gains would seem to far outstrip their losses. Either way, her faithful inquisitor need not be troubled, for all the bearing such dealings had upon his task.

Thrassus swelled with the news, turning his head—spattered in Addaran blood—to offer her a grateful smile. His wives and children would be among the arriving colonists. To be reunited after nearly a year’s separation. Because of *her* foresight and tenacity.

Their stroll through the blood-soaked warren ended at another ironbound door. The rusty latch bolt shrieked a lament as Thrassus wrenched it free of its housing. The door squealed a similar protest, but relented to his powerful shove.

His lantern pushed back the veil of shadows to reveal the lone figure housed within. The figure stirred. General Ohrma. A man for whom her father had borne a grudging respect. A once-worthy adversary who had repelled countless Grenarr landing attempts over his decades of service to the Addaran crown—including the ill-fated spring invasion hailed as the Blood Tide, now more than twenty years past, in the One Hundred Sixty-Seventh Year of Exile.

Of stark humiliation to her proud people, as most of the blood that season had been their own.

It had culminated not long after in her father being deposed by the Clamcrusher, Uruthus, who had seen his great vessel burned to cinders, her elder siblings butchered, and herself, a mere waif, escaped with her infant brother to become outcasts. The tribulations that had followed . . .

To think on them now caused her to smile. So long ago.

She admired her father to this day through the foolish eyes of a devoted young daughter. Nonetheless, she found it difficult to reconcile his description of the Addaran general with the decaying remnant of a man before her. Immersed in a tub to his shoulders. Force-fed milk and honey, until steeped in a stagnant stew of his own liquid excrement. His face lathered with the excess, to draw the mask of flies he now wore—a nest to maggots and their larvae. A breeding ground he was, for filth and disease, taking root in every orifice. Another rag who prayed vainly for death.

“Raise him,” she commanded.

Hanging his lantern on a hook, Thrassus circuited the tub, loosing the cords whose cinched lengths—attached to a neck collar—anchored the former general in place. The inquisitor then worked his way to a whim at the back of the chamber and wound it in a steady circle, reeling in a length of chain looped through an overhead ring, which in turn drew Ohrma skyward by a set of cuffs binding his wrists.

Sabrynne snorted at the putrid stench given rein as the general was hefted from the foul soup. Clouds of flies, disturbed by the unfamiliar tremors, flew free, buzzing their distress. A handful found their way to her. Brushing them aside, she stepped closer, defying her own disgust.

Ohrma scarcely stirred. Stripped and pale. Riddled with worms and rot. Seeming more than half dead, if not completely so.

“Softened, was my command,” she said, filling her voice with irritation.

With all but the general’s feet pulled from the tub, Thrassus latched the whim and took a nearby spear in hand. Exuding a cheerless confidence, he raked the spearhead against the top of Ohrma’s shins, just below the knee. Sagging skin tore away in strips under its own

swollen weight, sloughing from the exposed meat and bone. The general twitched. Then coughed. Then roused, bucking and kicking as if his legs had been set afire.

“Feeble will, overlord,” Thrassus muttered, his own tone lacking apology.

The general opened his eyes, blinking against the sweet paste that had soured there, and against the maggots clinging to it. His kicking steadied. Not for lack of pain, given the rictus of his face, but for a lack of sustainable strength. Beneath leathery skin that had taken on the shriveled texture of rotting plums, the fruit of aged muscles had gone slack.

Sabryne smirked. “He fought lustily enough when seeking to repel our incursion.” She tilted her head, angling her gaze to meet his. “Or is it that he overtaxed himself, having expended so much strength already in the course of his own revolt?”

She had triggered her long-brewing assault with a fleet of her warships, sent south through the Gorrethrian Sound. A retaliatory strike, it had seemed, for the Addarans’ murder of a decoy they had believed to be the Grenarr overlord, Great Grendavan. In truth, a feint that had served to lure the bulk of King Kendarrion’s forces north to reinforce the city of Indranell—thereby depleting those forces dedicated to defending the home city of Avenell.

Those who remained? Divided from within. Portraying herself as the Grenarr emissary assigned to oversee Kendarrion’s adherence to the accord that would see his abducted heir returned unharmed, she had won open admission to the Pretender’s court. A lamb among wolves, it would seem, were *she* not the one stalking *them*. Teasing, taunting, and otherwise flaunting herself among them, she had plowed a field of disgust and opposition in which to sow the seeds of civil discord. While the king himself protected her from those dissidents who would sooner see her killed or used for sport, her seeds had taken root, casting irrefutable light upon Kendarrion’s incapacity to lead during this personal crisis involving his royal children.

Spurring his critics toward insurrection.

Once Avenell had been weakened by the deployment of the bulk of its military, an uprising was sprung by the opposing “Loyalists”—those

who would see a stronger leader raised in Kendarrion's stead. A leader who would refuse the Grenarrian accord, built as it was upon an act of ransom. Who would sacrifice Prince Dethaniel and whomever else if it would deny the loathsome tar-skins so much as a toehold upon Addaran shores.

Ohrma, the retired general retained as Kendarrion's chief advisor, had served as that leader.

"Are you savoring your treatment?" she asked him, coaxing in her tone.

The faithless general fought to raise his head. A loll, he managed, as he swayed there in his shackles. Twice his mouth twitched as if to speak before words finally worked themselves free. "It is . . . no more . . . than I deserve."

Sabrynne scowled. For his sorrow and self-loathing, she brooked no sympathy. This, they had discussed already. "I asked you not to weep at me over the injustice wrought by your own hand. You might have quashed any attempt to betray your king, yet chose to spearhead the rebellion against him instead. That much was not my doing. Nor is it why you are here."

He tensed, shifted. An understanding, stripped from something she had said, emboldened him, lending him a spark of will. It glinted in his eyes and caused his lips to tighten with the barest hint of a mad smile. "My lord . . . is yet . . . beyond your reach."

"Nothing is beyond my reach. Time is all I require. The only thing your stubbornness serves is to prolong this ordeal." She flicked a knife from the sheath at her wrist, and used it to remove a leech from his thigh. "Where is Darr?"

Ohrma blinked, then looked away, clinging to his silence.

"You should know I've received word that your Princess Denariel is en route." The general's gaze lifted again, reflexive concern shaded by suspicion. "Captured by my chief steward," she explained. "If you will but inform me of your king's whereabouts, I will not only end your suffering, but I will spare her—his daughter and only surviving child—a torture less pleasant than your own."

"His Highness . . . Prince Dethaniel—"

"Dead. Slain upon my order, given wing the moment the city fell."

A penetrating sorrow crept across the general's brow, even as he strained to ward it off with desperate denial. A vein emerged along his reddening temple. His lower lip quivered.

"If you have any love for your king or his bloodline, you will do this."

She believed that love genuine, inasmuch as a treacherous landsnake was capable of it. By all accounts, Ohrma—keenly aware of the internal outcry to which his king was unwilling to listen—had been opposed to her people's ransom proposal from the outset, and advised Darr against it. Yet his personal loyalty had led him to stubbornly resist the notion of taking the crown by force, even as those within his city's hierarchy increasingly demanded it. It had taken considerable goading to realign his thinking, as she'd heard it. And *that* bolstered in no small measure by a professed belief that he might at some point restore power to Darr once the conflict had settled.

While this last may have been but a lie to assuage his guilty conscience, she believed—from his lips and others—that it was only with a heavy heart that he had, in the end, succumbed to their mounting pressure. His justification for personally advising Kendarrion to send the bulk of Avenell's garrison north? Not only to defend against the Grenarr landing at Indranell, but to execute his own takeover with minimal struggle and loss of life.

Convinced he was acting in his people's best interests.

She could see him struggling with a similar decision now. If her claims were true, did he owe it to his ruler and longtime friend to do what he could to spare the last of Darr's royal progeny some measure of pain? Surely, his confusion was bolstered by the effects of his own torment. As glimpsed in the gazes of his abused countrymen, she sensed the weaker part of him grasping at any thread of hope for ending his present anguish.

After a long moment of teary-eyed distress, his expression smoothed, a sheen of clarity overcoming his addled senses. "What drop of venom . . . from your tarred lips . . . can I take as truth?" He managed at last to heft his chin from his chest. "I will be no pawn . . . in your games. The best I can serve . . . is to die in His Majesty's stead . . . and greet my grave . . . knowing my people . . . still had a chance."

Vexing, truthful as it was. The Loyalist uprising had served well its primary purpose. During the mass confusion of the revolt, the city effectively torn in two, Sabrynnne had sent a small, secret force to infiltrate and sabotage the Seagate. A battery of Grenarr ships, standing by and teeming with warriors, had thus been able to enter the bay and assault Avenell from within. Making possible her victory, where so many other forays by her people had failed.

But the attack had foundered in its secondary objective: to capture Kendarrion himself. Upon recognizing the Grenarr sneak attack through the bay, Ohrma had released the freshly deposed king with his deepest apologies, and mobilized instead a rearguard defense while Darr and a sizable contingent of city soldiers fled north. The fickle general's feeble rally had scarcely slowed the Grenarr invasion, but had succeeded in buying the Pretender's escape.

Scouts sent to track them had returned in failure or not at all. While fighting to secure the city, she had lacked numbers sufficient to the task. Bolstering those numbers in the days since had made no difference. Hers were warriors of the sea. Masters of wind and swell. Men and women who speared fish and wrestled sharks. Yet ill-equipped to scale mountain, meander through canyon, or slog through jungle while seeking sign of cowering landsnakes.

She had patrols scouring the main roads, of course, but had fully expected Darr to avoid those—to slink instead along some series of back trails like a harried animal. Well known as an enthusiastic explorer in his youth, he would seek in this hour of defeat to grasp at every perceived advantage, his knowledge of the surrounding landscape being chief among them.

Even now, with reinforcements pouring in, she was loath to spend Grenarr lives by sending them thrashing into the wilderness in vain pursuit. Like casting seeds into the wind and expecting them to take root. She had other tasks for which her warriors would be needed, and so had focused from the outset on a more targeted approach. With Ohrma and a host of fellow captives delivered to Thrassus and his inquisitors, she had expected to mine the information necessary to locate Darr and his flock. To pinpoint the royal rebel before he could reunite with his northern army at Indranell. To decapitate the most

likely source of resistance and thereby strengthen her as-yet tenuous hold upon these shores.

Unable to sustain its weight, the general lowered his head. A crawling maggot fell from his matted white hair, only to join those infesting his beard. Sabrynne eyed its wriggling struggle, and considered. By now, she might be too late. It might be that the Pretender had already slipped through her loose net and found his way to that bastion of his in the north. And once empowered with his reserve army . . . A pitiless ruler. An aggrieved parent. Army? Were Darr more a man, a stick in hand would be sufficient with which to seek his revenge.

Her armada in the sound would continue to demand their attention, of course. Should the bulk remain at Indranell, she was inclined to let them rot, rather than waste lives trying to flush them out. But she harbored little doubt that they would mount a return. She knew too well what a dispossessed people, driven by a sense of vengeance, was capable of. Whomever their leader, they would at some point rally southward in an attempt to retake the capital. She could press to take some of the land between them now, but those who resisted would be experienced ground fighters who outnumbered her, knew the terrain better than she, and who would fight her every step of the way. Better to let them come to her so that she could ambush them at a time and place of her choosing.

To that end, the more she could learn about their movements and intent, the better prepared she would be to receive them. Unfortunately, her few spies amid that army were all but useless, with no easy means of contacting her from the field—and, more critically, no way to receive payment. For this and other reasons, she had placed the bulk of her confidence in Ohrma.

Quickly proving a wasted effort.

Sabrynne tapped her blade, still in hand, against her lip. Perhaps mistaking it as a sign of hostility, the general summoned another defiant breath.

“My pain . . . is well earned,” he rasped. “Your torments . . . just punishment . . . for my foolish treachery.”

A muted whisper of the same, tired refrain. As irksome as the

persistent buzzing of flies or the pervasive stench of his bowels. Sabrynne had scoffed at his attempt at nobility in the beginning, and was unimpressed by it now. “An honorable man does not absolve himself. Nor laden his deeds with justification as you have.”

“Honor . . . or not . . . you will kill me . . . before I betray my king . . . a second time.”

Sabrynne eyed him dispassionately, as again his momentary strength failed. How much more could his wasted form tolerate? What chance that he might be swayed?

She glanced at Thrassus. Sensing her question, he shook his head.

It chafed her, the thought of his suffering gone numb. She had half a mind to have him hauled fully from that tub and nursed back to health, that she might begin again. But that could take weeks, time better spent devising a new plan. There were others she might use to track the craven king and his rebels. Others of a heartier constitution and more willing persuasion. None as well trusted by Darr, perhaps. But with Denariel set to be delivered . . . that would seem to open any number of possibilities. And Kronus . . . Kronus had proven malleable, and would be put to use, one way or another.

If her thickening patrols hunting along the northern road could continue to wall the Pretender off from his army, she might yet achieve her aims sooner rather than later, the fleshy pustule before her be damned.

She marked the blood dripping down his shins, as distant screams raked at the wells of her ears. A rivulet tracing a ridge of exposed bone spurred her decision.

“Thrassus. Deliver this festering sack to Baccus and Pirrus. Let us weave another wreath with which to welcome the princess’s return.”



WITH THE DAY bending toward dusk, she returned to her royal quarters. Wending from dungeon bowels toward the palace’s hilltop pinnacle. Ascending through cramped, windless tunnels rank with squalor; through broad, windowed halls stark in function; and finally through

expansive, cushioned corridors perfumed and appointed for royal comfort. Arriving ultimately at a suite of chambers occupied just over a fortnight ago by the Pretender, but belonging now—like the rest of his stolen possessions—to her.

Along the way, she sent for Trathem.

She did not find him waiting, and so poured herself a wine to soften her thirst. Cup in hand, she retreated to a balcony to escape the mild din of craftsmen at work—chamberlain and stewards attended by draftsmen, stonemasons, carpenters, weavers, sculptors, jewelers, and other artisans, all laboring in some fashion to remove the stain of Darr's presence and remake the space more to her liking.

Facing south, she gazed down along the city's terraced hillsides and twisting roadways. Quiet, with a fair size of its former populace fled. The rest of the cornered landsnakes hunkered indoors, else risked the wrathful whims of her warriors. Only a handful of fires burned. Buildings wherein her forces had trapped rebel elements, or heaps of bodies caught out and slaughtered for their resistance. Fewer than the day before, she observed. Among the conquered civilians, grim acceptance was taking root.

Farther south, the descending sun cast a shimmering layer of molten gold upon the inner bay. So long closed to her, its inner shores were now being traced in slow, steady circuit by a handful of Grenarr Prowlers. At dock were four Marauders and a dozen Reavers. A meager fleet of Addaran ships had been completely destroyed—six in battle, and numerous others razed in their berths. Large craft and small. Royal and private. Too feeble to be of any meritable use, the vessels had served better as another sign of her superiority and will.

Another four Marauders, along with ten more Reavers and nearly a score of Prowlers, sailed the ocean waters nearby, most within a day's reach. Some had deposited a portion of their crews before taking up patrol routes along the lands beyond the Seagate. Others were still en route, not yet arrived. The latter included her colony ships, of course, along with the warships serving escort. Still two weeks out, or more, depending on the winds—and on how long it took for them to gather the Grenarr populations of the various atolls dotting the seas between Grenathrok, to the east, and Grenah, here in the west.

A voyage long-awaited. And, for all her eagerness, worth savoring. As, for many of her people, she intended it to be their last.

With the thought came a strange ache. An underlying pang reminding her that, triumphant as it might be, this momentous event marked a shift in the Grenarr way of life. After nearly two centuries of hard-fought lessons, the last thing she wanted was for her people to relinquish their dominion over the seas. Now that they had reclaimed their homeland, would they become complacent? Would they begin to neglect or forsake the skills that had made them who they were today?

Not under my rule, she determined, and cast the thought like an oath into the wind. The world she had won for them would bolster them, empower them. She would *not* let it consume them. If it meant bringing down a mountain or capturing a thunderbolt, she would—

“Overlord,” Tonlynnne announced at her back, “the snake you summoned has arrived.”

“Have Wrakus send him in. See the others out.”

“As commanded, my kiros.”

The distaste was thick in her chamberlain’s voice, but Sabrynnne chose not to address it. Truth unleashed, her expectation of what must likely follow made her queasy in a way she had never felt at sea. Before, the necessity had been clear. Now . . .

She had hoped for another way.

Draining the last of her wine, she turned and refilled her cup. By then, the sitting room had nearly emptied, laborers funneling dutifully toward the door, leaving behind their tools and materials. A few turned to bow and salute in departure, only to sneer or grimace on their way out at the pale-faced Addaran stopped just beyond the portal by Wrakus’s halberd.

Like any good shepherd, Tonlynnne made certain the flock had cleared before taking her own leave. She regarded the visitor with a critical gaze of revulsion as Wrakus—with a threatening expression—let him enter.

“The door,” Sabrynnne said.

Glaring from beneath her brow, the chamberlain obeyed.

“I daresay your watchdogs would sooner gut me than admit me,”

Trathem grouched.

Sabrynnne poured a second cup. “Fret not, my sweet. They’d not dare upset me so.” She extended his drink. “Not for the influence I hold with our overlord.”

He did not yet know that *she* was Grendavan. Nor would he discover it, she had determined, until she no longer had need of him. The truth might make her too inviting a target.

Not that she couldn’t defend herself. But he was of no potential use to her dead.

And useful he had proven. A highly regarded sergeant of the Stonewatch—Kendarrion’s land-based military force. Ranking high enough to be of influence, but not so high as to merit constant suspicion or accusation from political rivals. A man who’d been serving capably as an informant for her people for more than a year now—ever since his precious young daughter had been abducted in a Grenarr raid on the eastern shores of the Gorrethrian Sound.

Upon coming as an emissary to the Addaran court, hated and alone, she had sought him out and threatened to expose him to his superiors. A ransom of information had he paid already, to keep his stolen daughter safe. How merciful might his king be to learn of this?

Fear, for himself and his daughter, had made him impressionable and compliant from the outset. To serving as her eyes and ears within the palace. To listening in on Darr and his counselors as they debated their response to the accord proposed by her kind. To helping her determine whether they meant to follow through with their side of the forced arrangement as they professed to her.

Then the princess Denariel had gone missing, and everything was thrown into doubt. Doubt as to whether the king was being truthful with her. Doubt as to whether Trathem was. Desperate to prove his loyalty, the sergeant had worked that much harder to uncover and persuade her of the truth of things. That Nara had slipped away of her own volition. That she refused to abide by the terms of the accord to which her father cowed, and had sailed off to seek reinforcement from cousins occupying some distant land. That Darr, furious, had set a sizable contingent of Shadowguard to retrieve her . . .

All just so much distraction, welcomed by Sabrynnne as a suitable

diversion to her greater purpose. Amid the turmoil, she had found Trathem willing to take on additional responsibilities. To stir the pot and season the brew. To campaign among favorable ears—however quietly, at first—for Darr’s incapacitation and removal from office. Should he have been caught or reprimanded, no terrible loss to her. But he hadn’t. He had again served admirably, doing much to spark the flames of civil unrest by expressing his disgust toward her. Admitting that, after a lifetime of battling their dark kind, her mere presence served as an affront to his senses. As it should to theirs. How they should consider killing her. Against His Majesty’s wishes? To the swells with His Majesty’s wishes. Was His Majesty even fit to rule when he placed his son’s welfare above that of the Addaran people?

The sentiment had quickly gained favor and acceptance. A groundswell rising like a king’s tide. From Trathem, Sabrynne had learned who was most likely to revolt—those unafraid to match deeds to words—and worked in her own ways to fluster and frustrate them in passing. All while coaching her pet sergeant on how to bring them to action.

It was also around this time that she had begun to ply him with other forms of persuasion. With prompts and challenges of a more enticing nature. Raising possibilities that stoked a man’s deeper yearning for acceptance and fulfillment. However the Addaran power struggle played out, how high could he hope to rise under Darr? How high under a Loyalist regime led by General Ohrma? The Great Grendavan was pleased with his work. In addition to reuniting him with his daughter, her overlord could raise him to a station of wealth and comfort unlike anything an Addaran soldier could hope to earn.

Why would he do this? Trathem had naturally wondered. To which she had confessed her attraction to him. A forbidden fantasy, he had become to her. Could she ever be the same to him? The world she envisioned denied no man his desires simply because others said it could not be. She could take him as her lover, her husband even. When the Grenarr were restored to power, his would be a position of great esteem—of both honor and envy.

A song of temptation, sung with the perfect blend of earnestness and vulnerability. An ageless seduction, but one to which she had

found him susceptible. Serving to strengthen her influence upon him. To deepen his belief in her and what she hoped to achieve. To make her more intimate plans known to him. To make them *his*.

And himself a willing instrument in bringing them about.

But as she watched him now, she saw an old uncertainty resurfaced in his eyes. A deep mistrust held at bay only by foolish hope. She forced herself to smile sweetly, and again lifted his cup to him.

“Come,” she beckoned, and drank from her own.

Trathem hesitated, then crept forward and accepted her offering. Timid. As he had been in the beginning of their acquaintance. “I’ve asked for you.”

Sabrynne added a tinge of weariness to her smile. “Your pardon, my sweet. I’ve been otherwise engaged.”

Slowly, so as not to startle him, she raised her empty hand to cup his bearded cheek. He was not an ugly man, by Addaran standards, yet small and weak compared to her own. Wrapped in that damnably pale skin—tanned and freckled, but otherwise unfinished by the sun.

He warmed a measure at her touch. Self-consciously, he looked to his wine, and drank.

“Any word as to your lord’s arrival?” he asked.

“On schedule. It will please me for you to meet him at last.”

“Should I survive that long,” Trathem scoffed. He did so with a lighthearted tone, but his genuine concern was palpable. Doubtless, her fellow Grenarr had done all they could over the past couple weeks to make him feel unwelcome—short of stripping him from his skin. Permitted to bark and growl, but ordered not to bite. She felt no pity for him. For how long had she tolerated similar conditions?

But she could tell they had taken a toll on him. His eyes moved quickly, warily, almost feral in their gleam. For more than a week had she separated herself from him. Long enough to stir his suspicion. Now that her kind had taken the city, what place did he have in their world? Did she mean to cast him aside? Just how much sway did she truly have with the unknown master who would ultimately determine his fate?

The questions went unasked. He understood them to be irrelevant. He had cast his lot already, risking everything for the promise of his

daughter's return. Much as Darr had for *his* child.

The royal fool.

She itched to tell him as much. To see his expression crumble and his trusting hopes dashed.

Instead, she slid close, and pressed her mouth against his, kissing him hard. Reminding herself that he had earned better. For his efforts in spurring the Loyalist opposition. For sheltering her after she had fled the wedding massacre—when she had reassured him that the slain Grendavan was an imposter, and that her real master would yet deliver all that she had promised. For leading the pack of soldiers that had sabotaged the Seagate once Ohrma's uprising had been triggered, allowing her ships to enter the bay.

But acknowledging the extent to which she owed him only kindled her disgust. That she might in any way be beholden to a landsnake . . .

She broke the kiss, smiling sweetly and offering her hand. He took it, seeming mildly assuaged. She looked to the nearest furnishings, covered in the detritus of unfinished labors, and drew him instead toward her bedchamber.

A potpourri of flowers and spices couldn't quite drive out the stale mustiness of castle stone, or the strong hint of smoke carried by the breeze. It made her yearn for the deck of her ship—or even one of her balconies. Yet she hesitated to share with him the views from her quarters, where he might be reminded of the destructive chaos by which his countrymen had so recently been consumed.

She seated herself at the foot of her bed, and peered up at him imploringly. "I trust our time apart has not weakened your devotion to me."

"No."

A lie. He merely feared to speak the truth.

She pulled at his hand, until he sat down beside her.

"My sweet pearl. You've done all that I begged, and more. Kept me from assassination. Furthered my lord's aims. But when I lie awake, alone, I cannot fool myself that any of it was truly done for me."

She turned her head, as if dreading his lack of denial.

"Not so," he insisted, and squeezed her hand in emphasis. "I . . . I worry for Kesha, yes. I long to see her again. As I long to see you

when forced to endure such absence.”

She declined to meet his gaze. “You have plotted against and betrayed your people. Shed their blood. Listened to their screams. Heavy must be your regret.”

“What you told me in the beginning was true. My people would have abandoned my baby girl, imprisoned me on the mere suspicion of conspiracy, had they believed her taken and not killed in that raid.” He nudged her chin toward him. “What we have done here, we have done together. For our future.”

She hid her laughter with a hopeful smile. Why seek to reassure him, when it was so easy to spin the blade and force *him* to reassure *her*?

She eyed him gratefully, then pressed her head to his shoulder in a gesture of intimacy. After a moment of silence, she stiffened and withdrew. Sighing. Wearing a pained expression.

“You’re troubled,” he observed.

“My sweet. There’s something else I must ask of you.”

Again the flicker of doubt, fueled by a sense of self-preservation he was too deaf to listen to.

“A task unfinished. The one to ensure our peace is a lasting one.”

“Darr. You’ve found him?”

“No. But I believe I know how we might do so.”

She told him, then, of Denariel’s anticipated arrival. Of her plan to imprison the princess with some of the other Addaran captives—only to let this brood of prisoners escape.

“That they might find their way to Darr,” Trathem surmised.

“And with Nara among them, be welcomed into his midst.” She paused. “I would have you join them.”

Her pet snake scowled. “Why not simply hold her hostage?”

“For what? Your king’s surrender? He has already shown a willingness to spend her as currency.”

“He might feel differently, if your lord means to kill Thane as you’ve indicated.”

One of the half-truths she had confided in him, as a means of furthering his trust. Admitting that Grendavan did not intend to let Thane live. “See?” she said, seeing no reason to inform him that the sentence had already been carried out. “The treachery has gone too

far for there to be any faithful bartering. And there is too much dissent within Darr's camp—as already proven—to trust that his objectors would allow him to make any foolish pacts.”

She rubbed the side of his face, inwardly cringing at the scratch of his close-cropped beard against her palm. “I need someone I can trust to infiltrate their ranks. A reliable agent within their camp to apprise me of their movements. Nara will get you there. She has proven already to be a fighter. The rebels will trust her.”

“And me? My countrymen may be suspicious of my late entry to the prisons, given their fear of spies.”

“So we spin a tale by which you eluded us thus far, spearheading an underground resistance only recently rooted out.”

“My word alone, as there are none to back the claim.”

She envisioned her nails digging like talons into his ear, and ripping it from his head. “Suspicion is easily deflected,” she assured him. “If they wish to see shadows? We'll give them one.”

Already, she had the man in mind. A captain of the Pretender's so-called Shadowguard, taken captive by her warriors when discovered bound by his own people. Rendered useless to her, it had seemed, by his disgraced status. Easily bought, perhaps, but clearly unreliable, likely to switch sides or desert at the first sign of trouble. But as a diversion . . .

“What is the name of that greasy wretch who failed to ward your king? The flamebeard.”

“Ruhklyn.”

“Ruhklyn, yes.” Offer him the chance to prove himself valuable by informing against his own. Reposition him within the dungeons in a manner in which he might do so. A man such as him would be agreeable to this—to whatever he must say or do to gain favor. Dependable in his unreliability. Set *him* to play mole in order to draw attention from her real one.

Deceit within layers, using false aims nonetheless believable in order to mask her true intentions. Thus had her kingdom been won.

She smiled as his confusion smoothed with a rough understanding. Not entirely daft, this pawn of hers. At times, when not blinded by need, he could be downright clever.

“We’ve still no evidence of my own defense,” he said.

Again she kissed him, warm and deep. Imagined tearing off his tongue and swallowing it. Replacing the void in his mouth with another piece of his body, pared from his trunk with a rusty blade.

She settled for biting his lip, sharply enough to draw blood. Off his pained grunt, she withdrew, and slapped him. Hard.

“A few bruises should help tell the tale,” she said, and smiled seductively. “I can make sure you enjoy them.”

Eyes glittering with hunger, he did not protest.