

# The Light of the Oracle

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## **About the Book**

*A child born to such a calling is often called a dreamer . . .*

Bryn is a humble stonecutter's daughter, accustomed to being tagged the odd one, the strange girl, the shiftless creature. She is disturbed by visions of things no one else can see, sneered at because she talked to the wind and sky. Why, then, does the village priest think so highly of her?

But the day comes when a spinning thistledown leads Bryn to her destiny - to a place very different from the tiny village where she has spent her first fifteen years. She enters the famous Temple of the Oracle, and discovers that her innate gifts make her a terrifying threat to those who seek to abuse the Temple's power for their own glory.

Though her desires are simple - friendship with other handmaids and gaining the love of Kiran, a remarkable horse-trainer - she soon finds her path obscured by complex troubles. Struggling to keep the flame of her spirit pure and bright, Bryn must overcome more obstacles than she could ever imagine.

This extraordinary novel sweeps you into a world that can almost be touched - one where the people and colours remain in your mind for days after the book is closed.

# THE LIGHT OF THE ORACLE

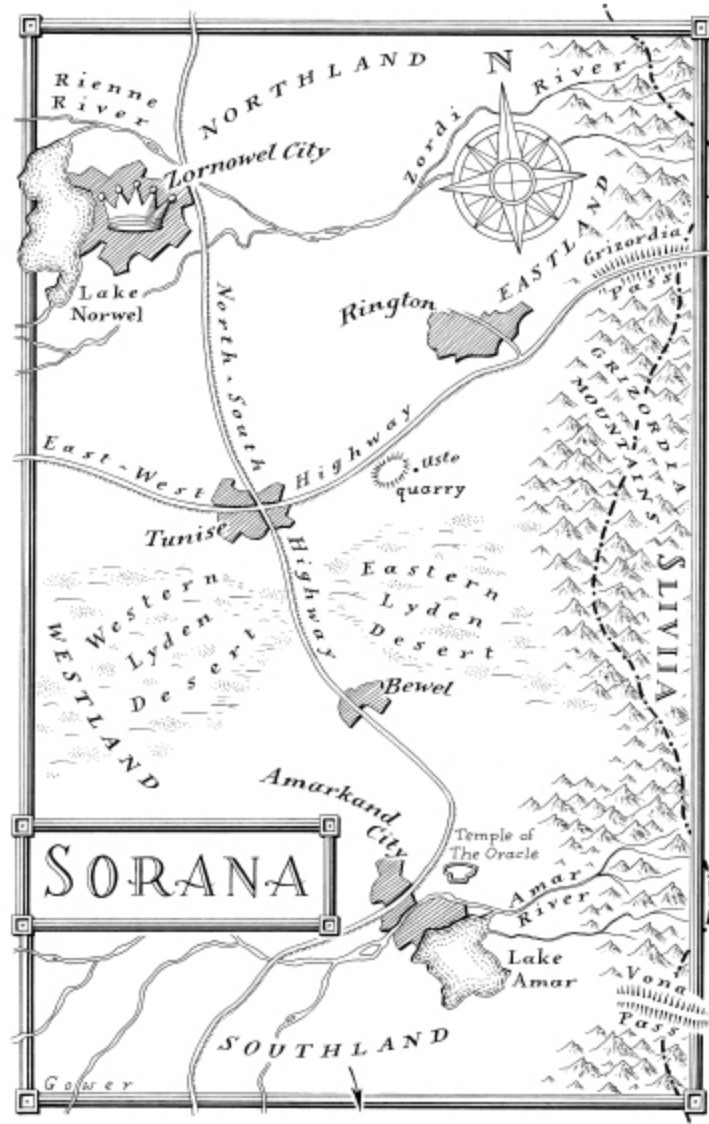
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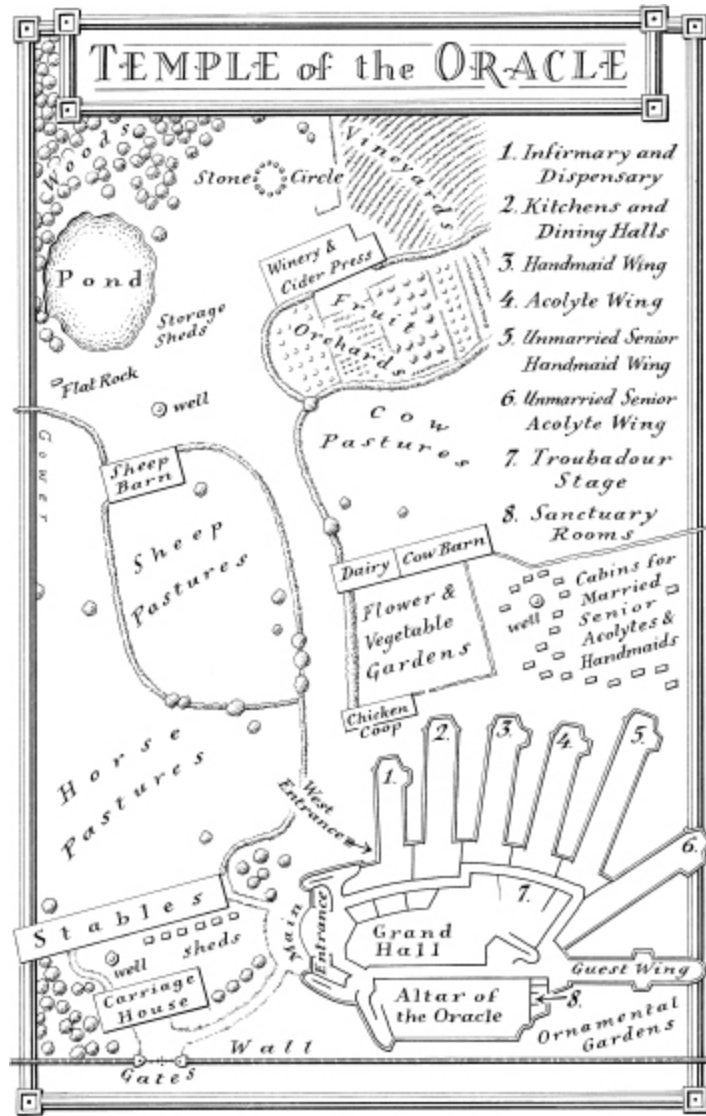
*To Emrys and Rose*

*To Phoenix*

*And to Readers everywhere*



# TEMPLE of the ORACLE





**SPRING**

## One

Bryn knew that others would consider it childish for a girl of fifteen to chase through fields after a plume of thistledown. If her mother had been watching, she would have thrown up her hands and berated the gods for sending her a good-for-nothing daughter. Her brothers would sneer; even her father would look troubled. But Bryn wasn't thinking of her disapproving relations; to her, the web of sunlight caught in the threads of thistledown seemed brighter than anything else in the world.

The silky down brushed against Bryn's forehead before whirling away again, borne on the breeze. She tried to catch it, but it kept moving out of reach, spinning and leading her on. How had it come to be there, dancing in the winds of spring? Normally, thistles didn't shed their seeds until full summer.

A loud neigh brought Bryn up short. A spray of pebbles stung her bare ankles, and shouts filled her ears. Falling backwards, she landed hard in the dust of the village road. The thistledown had led her straight across the path of a horse! She picked herself up, backing away from the great hooves that had nearly crushed her head. Across the road in the field beyond, her thistledown was hurrying away with the wind.

'Who are you?' asked the man whose horse had nearly trampled her. His red robes, embroidered with gold, moved stiffly in the breeze. Behind him rode a line of soldiers; gold and red insignia blazed upon the breastplates of their

armour. Beyond the soldiers, Bryn glimpsed more travellers.

She gazed, speechless. This vision was more real than any of the others that had glimmered before her eyes over the years. She blinked and waited for it to disappear.

'Who *are* you?' A large ring on the rider's hand flashed in her eyes.

Bryn was accustomed to being tagged the odd one, the strange girl, the silly dreamer. Only Dai, the village priest, seemed to think well of her. She had often been mocked for talking to her visions, but this one seemed to demand an answer. 'Bryn, sir.'

'Bryn, is it?' His lean face showed no expression. 'Why did you run in front of my horse?'

Bryn looked again at the ornate embroidery on his robes. He didn't disappear; his form was just as solid as the pebbles digging into the soles of her feet. She bent into the deep bow Dai had taught her for greeting an important priest.

When she straightened, he was still staring. 'I asked why you ran in front of my horse.'

'I don't know, sir.' How could she tell him that the thistledown had led her?

'Tell me. No harm shall come to you.'

Bryn pointed across the field, though the wind was empty now. 'The thistledown,' she said. 'It wanted me to follow.'

He didn't laugh at her. 'Where do you live, Bryn?'

'By the quarry.'

'Does your father cut stone?'

'Yes, sir. My brothers, too.'

'Can you ride a horse?'

Bryn nodded, somewhat guiltily. She and Aaron, the blacksmith's son, had made free with every horse in the village - at night when their stalls were left unguarded. Aaron had even dared her to ride a spirited stallion that

had once been stabled with his father's horses. Bryn had taken the dare, and she would never forget the sensation of flying across the moonlit fields.

'Bolivar,' the priest said to a soldier just behind him. 'Fetch the white mare.'

Bolivar, a large man with a short moustache, led forward a snowy horse, saddled and bridled with a blue harness. The soldier's armour creaked as he lifted Bryn into the saddle, the muscles of his arms bigger than a blacksmith's.

Bryn wasn't used to the side-saddle position. She felt awkward. When she rode with Aaron, both of them simply flung themselves bareback on whatever horses they could find.

'Which way to your home?' the priest asked her.

'That way, sir.' She pointed. To get to the quarry by way of the road, they would have to pass through her village, which was called Uste after the first rock miner to settle there. How Bryn wished she could ride this splendid horse through all her favourite places by herself. At home, this important man would tell her mother how foolish she had been; how she had run heedlessly in front of him.

'Come then,' the priest ordered, and urged his horse to a trot.

Bryn rode behind him. She wished Dai were there to explain who this grand priest might be - but Dai would be alone in the rectory at this time of day. He called it his time of prayer, though Bryn knew he contemplated bottles of wine instead of focusing on devotion to the gods.

The villagers were calling one another out of their shops, bowing to the red-robed priest who led the procession of riders. When he lifted his shining ring, they bowed lower. Bryn eyed the ring uneasily. It was wrought into the shape of a golden *keltice*, the knot sacred to the gods. Dai had told her that the Master Priest of the Oracle had such a ring. *And no one but the Master Priest may wear it*, he had said, his filmy eyes crinkling at the corners.

Could it be the Master Priest himself visiting the meagre village of Uste? It hardly seemed possible. The Temple of the Oracle was far away, past the Lyden Desert to the south. Besides, important people rarely passed through Uste. The stone quarried here was unremarkable; those who used such stone for making lowly walls and cottages would send labourers to transport it, not renowned priests.

The procession passed the baker's shop at the end of the village. As it approached the quarry, the road ahead began to fill with men and boys, rock hammers in hand. And from their midst, a woman hurried forward; it was Bryn's mother, Nora. Someone must have carried news to the quarry.

Nora pushed her way to the front of the crowd of stonecutters. When she saw who rode near her daughter, her face turned chalky. She bowed deeply. Bryn's father, Simon, shouldered through to stand next to his wife. He too bowed low.

'You are this girl's parents?' The priest's voice cut through all the murmurs around him.

'Yes, sir.' Nora's face hardened. 'Whatever she's done, please forgive her. She doesn't know what she's about.'

'She has done nothing to offend. I have come to visit her parents. If you would be so good as to receive me into your home, I will speak with you and your daughter. Alone.' He gave the last word only a small emphasis, but the knot of men and boys began to unravel and move back towards the quarry. Astonishing. Bryn had never seen a man with such power.

'Our house is close by, Your Honour, but we have no stables, only one stall,' said Simon, looking anxiously at the mounted soldiers grouped behind the priest.

'I understand.' The priest dismounted. He nodded to Bolivar, who leaped from his own horse and then lifted Bryn down from the mare.

Bryn walked with Bolivar after the priest, who followed her parents down the path worn smooth by generations of stonecutters. The rest of the procession stayed silently behind. She looked up only when they came near the cottage where she lived. It had been her home for fifteen years, but now she imagined seeing it for the first time, and the sagging porch and patched walls stood out glaringly.

The priest stooped to go through the door. Bolivar remained outside, glaring vigilantly across the scarred land.

Inside, Simon dragged forth the good chair for their guest. Nora prepared tea, while Bryn stood watching. Nora set forth the white porcelain cup decorated with painted violets that had belonged to her grandmother; the cup Bryn and her brothers were never allowed to touch.

'Sorry I have no sugar, Your Honour,' Nora said.

'No need. I never take sugar in my tea.' The priest gestured with his ring for them to sit. Bryn sank onto the bench beside the old wooden table, across from her parents. 'You know who I am?' he asked.

'Master Priest?' Simon breathed, bowing again from where he sat.

The priest inclined his head. 'Yes. You may call me Renchald.'

*Renchald.* Bryn heard Dai's voice in her mind, cracked and thin with age and wine, telling her that name. '*I was long gone from the Temple, my dear, when Renchald rose to be Master Priest.*' Bryn stared at the tall, clean-shaven man sitting so upright in her family's one good chair, his robes gleaming with gold, his green eyes inscrutable. His shoulders weren't as broad as her father's nor his chest as deep, but somehow he exuded great strength. Strands of silver threaded the dark hair at his brow; his long fingers gripped the porcelain cup firmly. The Master Priest of the Temple of the Oracle sitting in a stonecutter's cottage, drinking ordinary tea? *Why?*

‘This journey I’m on,’ he said, ‘includes the purpose of finding new handmaids to serve in the Temple of the Oracle. As you may know, these handmaids and the male acolytes who also study there receive the best education in Sorana. Some handmaids progress to the rank of priestess.’ He paused. ‘Your daughter would be suitable to become a handmaid.’

Bryn nearly choked on her tea. Sweat ran over Simon’s face, as if he laboured in the sun instead of sitting in the cool of a stone cottage. The skin around Nora’s eyes jumped as though bitten by unseen insects.

‘I don’t see how that can be, sir,’ Nora protested. ‘The girl is nothing but a dreamer. Not good for anything but talking with the air, idling about in the woods with nothing to show for her hours away.’

Bryn opened her mouth to say she knew better than to talk with the air, but Renchald spoke first. ‘Come now, madam. I have been Master Priest for more than a decade. Do you believe that I am mistaken?’

Bryn’s mother shook her head, her narrow face whitening as she looked at the floor.

‘Those who serve the Oracle see what others miss,’ the Master Priest went on. ‘A child born to such a calling is often thought to be a dreamer.’

Bryn swallowed more tea, gulping back a hundred questions.

‘Can she read or write?’ Renchald asked.

‘Why would the daughter of a stonecutter learn to read?’ Simon answered mildly.

‘The daughter of a stonecutter,’ Renchald answered, ‘might have no reason to learn. But a priestess of the Oracle must be able to read the messages of kings and queens.’ He turned to Bryn. ‘Would you like to study such things?’

Bryn swished the dregs of her tea and then set down her cup. ‘I *can* read and write,’ she said. She met her mother’s

outraged eyes. 'Dai taught me.' Without the Master Priest's presence, Nora would surely have shouted in anger. Bryn addressed Renchald, explaining, 'The village priest. Dai.'

'Ah.' If he knew of Dai, he didn't say. 'How long has he been teaching you?'

'For many years. I've read all his books several times over.'

'Ah,' he said again, and a spark of unreadable feeling flickered in his eyes.

'I don't understand.' Simon sounded as if someone had told him the quarry where he'd worked all his life was not a place to cut stone after all.

'The gods keep their ways hidden,' Renchald answered.

*The gods.* Ever since Bryn could remember, her mother had called upon the gods, asking why they had made her bear five sons, then finally given her the daughter she had prayed for, but such a daughter! A girl who burned the supper if asked to mind it, who flitted about the fields and woods, coming home with sap stains on her threadbare clothes and foolish lies on her lips - lies about people she had never met and places she had never been. Why, Nora had demanded, would the gods send her such a child?

Her father asked the gods for their blessing every morning and evening, his prayers a tumbling mutter that meant little to Bryn. And though Dai had taught her the rudiments of the pantheon, most often he spoke of the gods as if they were malicious tricksters who would trip a man on his path for the pleasure of seeing him stumble. '*Winjessen is a sly one, but it's Keldes you must look out for - Keldes wants more subjects for his kingdom of the dead . . .*'

Bryn wanted to ask Renchald what made him think she could be a handmaid in the Temple. But he was speaking to her parents, his ring glinting as he raised a hand. 'Do you give your consent for Bryn to travel to Amarkand? There she will be with others of her kind. She will serve the gods.'



*Others of her kind!* Bryn's heart swelled. Were there others in the world like herself? Perhaps they, too, had mothers whose faces never softened when they were near. The Master Priest had said that sometimes handmaids became priestesses of the Oracle. Could anything on earth be more wonderful?

Simon wiped the sweat from his face with his dusty sleeve, leaving tracks of grime on his forehead. 'She is our only daughter.'

'She will bring you honour,' Renchald said.

Nora shrugged. 'When would she go?'

'If you are willing to part with her today, I will take her with me now,' said the Master Priest. 'If we leave soon, my companions and I will have time to reach Tunise by evening. The journey to the Temple will take two more days.'

Bryn looked at the lines on her father's face, lines like grooves in a beloved carving. He held out his hand. 'Come here to me, girl.' He put a finger under her chin. 'It's a chance for you. Shall you go?' And she knew that if she said no, he would not give his consent.

Looking past her father through the open doorway, Bryn nodded. When Simon folded her into his arms, she hoped her tight embrace would tell him how much she would miss him.

'You have my blessing, Bryn,' he said.

She faced her mother next. 'My blessing, daughter.' Nora's kiss was cold as sleet on Bryn's cheek. She spoke to Renchald. 'What should she take with her?'

The Master Priest stood. 'The Temple will supply her with everything she needs.' He looked down at Bryn. 'Unless there is something you particularly wish to bring?'

In her mind the girl counted over her belongings. She had one other dress but it was even more stained than the one she wore. No shoes, and she had outgrown her old coat; she was supposed to make herself another but she'd

put it off, for the weather was warm. She kept some pretty rocks near her bed, but somehow when she looked at the Master Priest's stern eyes, she couldn't bring herself to mention them. She shook her head.

Renchald gave a formal bow. Her parents bent nearly to the floor.

At the threshold, Bryn turned back. 'Tell my brothers goodbye,' she said.

## Two

Outside in the glare stood Nirene, Sendrata of Handmaids. As Sendrata, it was her job to oversee all the handmaids within the Temple of the Oracle; to make certain they obeyed the rules of the Temple, from rising at the gong to snuffing candles at the end of the day.

Nirene regretted being part of this expedition. She'd much rather be attending to her duties back at the Temple, where her authority was firm, than be here, suffering in the sun, a distant shadow to the Master Priest. The only reason she'd been obliged to travel with him was because of Clea Errington.

Clea. Sixteen-year-old daughter of Lord Bartol Errington, the most powerful man in Sorana's Eastland and distant cousin to the queen. Brought up in royal splendour, now Clea would have to adjust to being only one more handmaid in the Temple. Instead of lacy gowns, she'd be expected to wear blue student robes. The spacious bedchamber that had been hers in her father's castle would give way to a small cell separated from her sister handmaids by nothing more than a curtain. No longer would she be waited on hand and foot; she'd have chores assigned to her.

Travelling with the Sendrata of Handmaids was supposed to help the girl reconcile herself to such changes, but Clea had done nothing but complain: Why must she ride at the rear of the procession? Why were she and Nirene given second-rate rooms at the inns where they

stayed? How dare she be made to wait for food when she was hungry? The wine was no better than vinegar . . .

Now she stood beside Nirene at the end of the procession, wrinkling her pretty nose. 'How long must we wait in this sinkhole?'

'Patience,' Nirene answered sourly. She watched as the Master Priest led the scrawny stonecutter's daughter towards her. Bolivar, captain of the Temple guards, marched close behind them, his hand on the bridle of the white mare the girl had been riding.

'Nirene, meet Bryn,' Renchald said when he drew near. 'She will become a handmaid in the Temple. I put her into your care.'

Nirene bowed: Sendrata of Handmaids to Master Priest. Renchald bowed quickly in return. 'Bryn, meet Nirene, Sendrata of Handmaids to the Oracle.'

The girl's eyebrows were strongly arched like birds in flight; she had odd teak-coloured eyes, which she lowered properly when she bowed. Her bow itself was appallingly inept, however. Her palms hardly met before flopping open as her back hunched and straightened, but if Renchald was offended by her ignorance, he concealed it. He spoke to her politely. 'I believe we passed a rectory?' he asked.

Bryn nodded, biting her lip.

'We will stop there on our way out of the village so you can say farewell to this priest who taught you,' he said. Before she could reply, he turned away, walking to his horse.

Bryn's glance fell across Nirene and then went to Clea.

Lord Errington's daughter had hair the colour of dandelion flowers; she wore a dainty bonnet trimmed with yellow ribbons. Lace adorned the collar and cuffs of her dress, silky flounces her skirt. Soft leather boots fit her feet so well they had obviously been made just for her. It would have been hard to find a greater contrast to the stonecutter's daughter, with her tangled brown hair

hanging loose down her back, stained smock so skimpy it was almost indecent, and bare feet covered with scratches and calluses.

Nirene touched Clea's shoulder. 'Meet Clea,' she told Bryn. 'Like you, she will study in the Temple.'

Bryn smiled with surprising warmth. She bowed to Clea.

Lord Errington's daughter flinched. 'He can't mean it,' she said disgustedly to Nirene. '*She* is going to Amarkand?'

A wary look passed over Bryn's face.

'The Master Priest has chosen her,' Nirene answered.

Clea's eyes glittered spitefully. 'But she's so . . . dirty. Rather like a rat.'

Under Clea's stare, Bryn's cheeks began to burn red beneath the smudges on her face.

'In the Temple, you will be sisters to one another,' Nirene promised, not believing her own words. 'Now, mount up. We are moving.'

Clea mounted expertly, her foot light on the stirrup, springing to sit side-saddle. Bryn grasped her mare's neck, pulling herself astride the horse like an untaught boy, the hem of her smock riding up to her knees in the process. Once mounted, she threw both legs awkwardly over one side of the saddle.

Clea laughed unpleasantly. 'I spoke out of turn,' she said. 'What rat could ride with such grace as that?' She guided her horse to one side of Nirene while Bryn rode on the other and they followed the Temple procession.

Bryn turned to Nirene. 'Are you a priestess?'

Nirene gritted her teeth.

Clea gave a loud sniff. 'Can't you see she's not wearing the robes of a priestess? She may be Sendrata of Handmaids, but she's still a *handmaid* - and she'll never be a priestess.' She smirked. 'The gods did not find her worthy.'

Stung by Clea's words - however true they might be - Nirene seethed. She'd have liked to throw Clea from her

horse and see her dragged in the dust. It was something the Sendrata of Handmaids could order. But Clea's father was too important a patron of the Temple to risk his disfavour. Nirene contained her anger with silence.

Bryn too kept quiet as they passed through the village of Uste once more. The people stood in front of their wretched little shops, bowing. A grubby lad with a tuft of sooty hair waved wildly at Bryn, and when she waved back, a grin split his face.

On the edge of town the Master Priest halted in front of a dilapidated rectory. The building had once been painted red, as was suitable, but only peeling strips of dull colour remained. The keltice knot carved in the door was nearly invisible in the weathered wood.

Bryn almost fell as she slid from her horse. She bit her lip again, looking anxiously at the rectory.

The Master Priest approached on foot. 'Come, Bryn,' he said. 'You too, Nirene.'

They mounted broken steps. The door opened to a musty entryway. The unmistakable smell of sour wine greeted them as they passed into the rectory itself, where a few crumbling pews faced an altar. A single candle, set upon a dingy altar cloth, burned before a woefully faded image of the god Solz. An old man in tattered robes lay sprawled beneath shelves stuffed with books. Several empty wine bottles were strewn beside him.

Bryn rushed forward. She bent to the man, shaking his shoulder gently. The reek of wine was overpowering.

'Dai,' Bryn whispered. 'Dai, wake up!'

He stirred, but didn't open his eyes. 'Bryn?' he mumbled. 'G'on - take any book.'

'Dai!'

'Step away from him,' said the Master Priest.

The girl stumbled as she took hasty steps backwards.

Renchald's deep voice sounded eerie in the impoverished rectory. 'Won't you pay your respects to the

Master Priest, Dai?’ His gold keltice ring shone in a band of light where dust motes danced.

The man’s lids fluttered. He gazed up at Renchald through bloodshot eyes, then began a fruitless scramble to get to his feet. He kept tumbling over. ‘Szorry,’ he muttered.

Nirene could barely contain her disgust. Stinking drunk under the very nose of the gods! Well, this so-called priest wouldn’t live much longer. Nirene’s practised eye sized him up: *Not only very old. Sick enough to be near death’s door.*

Dai stopped trying to stand. He sat, grey head swinging slowly from side to side. His bleary glance found Bryn, and he began to laugh in a strange despairing cackle. ‘G’bye,’ he said. ‘Always knew . . . they’d come for you, Bryn.’ His hand flapped towards the door as he looked up at the Master Priest.

‘You knew?’ She seemed puzzled.

‘Remember—’ Dai began, but then groaned heavily, clutching his chest. The sound of his breathing filled the rectory as he struggled for air.

‘Dai?’ Bryn flung herself to the floor beside him. ‘Dai?’

‘No,’ he gasped out. He pitched backwards, his body twitching like a tired fish, eyes wide and popping. His skin began turning blue.

Bryn caught one of his flailing arms, but he pulled it away. He didn’t seem to see her, gazing fixedly at the wall beyond. She looked around wildly. ‘Help him!’ she cried.

The Master Priest kneeled next to her. He cradled Dai’s head in his large hands as the old man thrashed about. Dai went rigid. A long deep sigh escaped him and then he was still.

Bryn tugged at his shoulder. ‘Dai, please, please.’ When he didn’t move, she sank back on her heels, panting like a winded animal.

‘Don’t grieve,’ Renchald said softly. ‘He probably lived with pain for many years.’ He looked up at Nirene. ‘Take

Bryn outside. I will administer the final blessing.'

The girl's stare was blank. Her large eyes filled with tears, and she looked even more of a waif than she had before. The simpleton obviously didn't comprehend Dai's good fortune. Why, the Master Priest himself would give the final blessing! It was what every priest hoped for.

'Come,' Nirene said briskly, snapping her fingers.

Bryn wiped her eyes with grubby hands, leaving more dirt streaks on her face. She got to her feet, and Nirene put a firm hand on her elbow. At the doorway she paused to look back at the Master Priest bending over the dead man, but Nirene didn't let her linger.

The sunlight outside stabbed their eyes sharply. From the back of her horse, Clea sneered down at Bryn. 'Why are you crying? Is that the only way to wash your face?'

'Hush,' Nirene said. 'Her priest is dead.'

Clea gave a disdainful sniff. 'What did he die of? Shame?'

Bryn glared. 'He was more than you'll ever be,' she said.

'Quite a eulogy,' Clea answered. 'More than me? Undoubtedly he was - more ignorant.'

Bryn didn't answer, turning her back. Clea smiled knowingly.

During the ride to Tunise, the Master Priest halted the procession each time they came to a crossroads; there he would pour libations of wine and lead prayers to Winjessen, the god who presided over travel as well as learning.

After several crossroads, Bryn, drooping in her saddle, surprised Nirene by asking, 'Why must Winjessen be reminded again and again to watch over our journey? Isn't he fleet of thought and quick of memory?'

'Hush,' Nirene said, glad they were too far from the Master Priest to be heard. 'Don't speak of things about which you know nothing.' How abominably backward the girl was. Well, judging by the state of his rectory, her



village priest had likely forgotten everything he'd learned in the Temple as a youth.

Clea was snickering. 'She doesn't know *anything*. Why don't you throw her back in that sinkhole she crawled from?'

Bryn was quiet, patting her horse.

When they reached the city of Tunise, Bryn's head waved like a weed in the wind, her eyes wide, taking in the streets. Vendors, colourfully dressed beneath flimsy awnings of orange, yellow and blue cloth, called out to passers-by; mobs of children, circling the vendors, looked for treats they might steal; merchants haggled with their customers.

At last, the Temple procession arrived at the inn where they would stay. After dinner, Nirene and her two charges were given a small, dank chamber with three narrow cots.

Clea stood in the middle of the room, sputtering her rage. 'This place is no better than a cottager's shed. Order a bath for me, Nirene, and a better room.'

Nirene took a firm grip on her patience. 'Tunise is not a wealthy city. The accommodations are scant, as you can well see. I cannot better them. When you arrive in the Temple, your quarters will be as small. You may as well get used to it.' She pointed to a basin in the corner. 'We'll wash there.'

Clea whirled upon Bryn. 'I'm descended from King Zor. I'll not sleep anywhere near this rat, nor share a basin with the likes of her. She looks as if she's never bathed in her life.'

'I bathe in the quarry,' Bryn flared in answer, 'where the water is deep.'

Clea lifted her nose. 'And in the winter? What do you do then - wait for spring thaw?' She clenched her fists. 'Get her out, Nirene.'

'You can't dismiss a sister handmaid, Clea. If you don't wish to sleep here, you may stand in the corridor.'

Clea threw herself onto the cot closest to the wall, turning her face away.

As Bryn splashed water on her skin, she imagined she was washing away her sadness over Dai's death along with the dust of the road. She wished she'd known the day before that he was close to the end of his life. She would have told him what it had meant to her to know him, to be taught by him.

*I would have said goodbye.*

What had they talked about instead? She remembered him saying that he'd pondered the riddles of life, and that his own fate was known all too well. *'The only possible mystery to be found in Uste is that of a glorious girl named Bryn. Why was she born in such a sinkhole?'* He'd chuckled and raised his glass to her.

Had he really known that 'they' would come for her? And what had he meant to remind her of when he said 'Remember'?

Bryn slid onto her cot, lying quite still as Nirene snuffed the candles.

Listening to Nirene's quiet breathing, Bryn missed the sounds of her brothers tossing and turning, of her father's gentle snores. Her thoughts swirled like the thistledown she had followed earlier. It hardly seemed possible that in the morning she had been running through the fields like a heedless child. Now the old man who had opened the world to her by teaching her and lending her his books was dead. She was lying on a cot in a city she'd never seen before between two near strangers, both of whom seemed to dislike her.

*On my way to the Temple of the Oracle to meet with others of my kind,* she thought wistfully.

At that moment Clea hissed at her. 'Psst.'

Bryn turned. She couldn't see Clea through the dark. 'What is it?'