

Chapter One

He was weary.

Orrin Blackhart strode through the great kitchen, past the cold hearths and scullery boys, past the cooks with their stained aprons, cold kettles, and wide eyes. Silence followed him as he emerged to march across the small courtyard, scattering the geese and chickens before him. His stride was long, his steps strong and steady, an old habit not to show exhaustion or pain. He was soul-weary, truth to tell, although his lips curled in derision at the thought.

As if he had a soul.

Men watched as he crossed the yard and angled toward the door to the dungeons beneath. He could have avoided their gaze, for there were other ways into the depths of the Keep of the Black Hills, but those were dark, filthy, and guarded by the odium. They were the undead guardians of this place, and though he appreciated them as a weapon, he could do without the stench. He'd wanted a bit of air before plunging into the depths of the prison, where light and breath were precious and rare.

A puddle of something foul lay in his way, but he stepped square into it with his black boots, determined to take the straightest route. After all, the Scourge of Palins never wavered in his duty: to protect his Baroness and his people. He took whatever means was necessary, used whatever weapon was at hand, to accomplish that goal.

Hadn't he?

Pah. He was weary of the filth. Weary of stupidity, weary of trying to preserve the lives of his men. Bone-deep weary, that was the worst of it. No amount of sleep brought him rest or ease.

Orrin set his jaw and kept walking.

They knew where he went, his men. They knew full well what lay in the depths beneath the courtyard. Word would have flashed through the Keep, from the lowest scullery to the highest tower. He could almost feel their questions on his skin. Why had High Baroness Elanore left with a small force when the men were needed on their borders? What use would this prisoner be for their cause?

They looked to him, Orrin Blackhart, Lord Marshal of the Black Hills.

Pity he had no answers.

He strode to the door, bearing the burden of their regard. He'd served Lady Elanore, Baroness of the Black Hills, for years now, but the weight was heavier with each passing day. Each passing hour. It didn't help that since her injury, Elanore had grown obsessed with her power and the undead odium that she could create with it.

Orrin scowled. Of late she'd grown even more focused and secretive. The Baroness had come up with this scheme to take one of the leaders of the rebellion prisoner. Once that had been set into motion, she'd used her magic to make even more of the odium than he'd thought possible. Then she'd left, with men and odium he needed for defense. Left, damn her, against his advice, and no reasoning would convince her otherwise.

His fist was hard clenched before he even raised it to pound on the door. Three blows, then a swift turn to sweep the yard with a stern glance.

Men turned quickly back to their tasks, and the normal business of the Keep resumed. Weary he might be, but he was Lord Marshal. None would challenge or question.

For now.

Reader looked up from his book. “That’s him coming.”

As Archer lifted his head from his work, he saw Sidian raise one of his bushy white eyebrows, a move Archer always watched with quiet amusement. Sidian was black-skinned, his face, chest, and arms covered with ritual scars, and so dark that his bald head and thick white eyebrows were startling. When one brow moved like that, it was as if a fuzzy bug had crawled over his eye.

“How so?” Sidian asked in his clipped accent. “You’ve no way of—”

The pounding at the door cut him off.

“Why do you doubt, friend?” Archer asked quietly. “He’s always right.”

Sidian snorted as Reader jumped up, thrusting his book into his pack. The small man wiped his palms on his pants as he darted to the door and jerked it open.

Blackhart stood framed in the doorway, silhouetted against the day. As he stepped in, his hazel eyes pierced the room.

Archer was unmoved by Blackhart’s glare. True enough, the darkness of this place was no match for Orrin Blackhart, Lord Farentell to Lady High Baroness Elanore and death incarnate to her enemies. But Archer had known the man and been part of his hearth-band for years, and

the impact of that glare had worn a bit around the edges. It had been aimed in his direction a fair number of times over the years. Not that he was used to it. Not that at all.

“Well?” Blackhart growled.

“Very well,” Archer replied calmly. “She walked right into our trap. Your information was good.”

Blackhart grunted. “Should be, considering the source. Anyone hurt?” He looked at the other men.

“No.” Archer gave the man the reassurance he needed. “Timothy and Thomas are taking care of the horses. There wasn’t even a fight, it was that easy. There was another priestess with her, but she pushed him back through the portal before we could grab him, too. It closed before we could blink.”

Blackhart’s shoulders relaxed a bit. “We’ve got her. That’s all that matters.”

“Sidian probably scared her,” Reader piped up, “what with them scars and all.”

Sidian raised that eyebrow again, but didn’t rise to the bait.

“Where is she?” Blackhart moved farther into the room.

“Below. Mage is keeping an eye on her.” Archer nodded toward the door that led below.

Blackhart frowned again. “The spell chains are—”

“Working fine,” Archer assured him. “But she’s prayin’, and that’s got Mage nervous.”

Blackhart grunted, and grabbed a torch. “For all the good praying will do . . .” He opened the door that led to the cells, and headed down the stairs. Archer settled back, and returned to work on the arrow in his hands. The dungeon was a mite close for his taste.

Besides, Blackhart could handle one small priestess by himself, now couldn’t he?

Torchlight danced on the walls as Orrin stomped down the narrow staircase. The heels of his boots clicked on the stones, echoing in the spiral that descended into the depths. The stench filled his nose, leaving an acrid taste in the back of his throat. The men posted to duty in these tunnels claimed that the damp cut clear to the bone.

They were right.

The guard at the bottom nodded him toward the right passage. The dungeon was a warren filled with tunnels and cells. One could wander lost if one wasn't careful. Done by design at some point, Orrin was sure. Hard to rescue someone when you can't find yourself, much less their cell.

One of the guards led him to the very end of one of the corridors, and there, in a niche in the wall, sat Mage, wrapped in his cloak against the cold and damp. Mage jumped to his feet with a youthful vigor Orrin envied.

"Sir," Mage said softly.

"Which cell?"

Mage gestured, and Orrin moved to look through the tiny barred window. The cell held a small candle, and in the center of the pool of light knelt a woman dressed all in white, her head bowed, her white hair glowing in the light.

Orrin stepped back, and kept his voice down. "The spell chains working?"

Mage nodded. "I used fresh ones, just to be sure. She can't use any magic. Been praying since we put her in there. Thought maybe I'd keep watch, her being a high priestess and all. I mean, so far she's not trying to cast magic. But the praying" The youngster

shrugged. “Not sure what I’d do if her gods appeared, but I thought—”

Orrin rested a hand on his shoulder. “A good thought.”

Mage lifted his head and straightened his shoulders. Orrin suppressed a chuckle, then turned to the guard. “Open it.”

The guard moved quickly, fumbling with his keys. Orrin eased back to give the man room, and waited patiently. Once the door was opened, he handed the torch to Mage, and bent down to enter the cell.

The woman looked up as he entered, regarding him calmly. Her hands were folded before her. The manacles were tight on her wrists, and the chains that linked them dangled before her robes. Orrin noted the chain that ran along the floor and secured her ankle to the wall.

He’d heard the tales, of course, but it was a surprise to find her hair thick and white, and her eyes the barest blue. She was younger than he’d expected, maybe a few years younger than himself.

She seemed to magnify the glow of the candle, but he was sure that was a contrast to the darkness about her and not her innate goodness. Not that it mattered, either way. Innocence would be no protection here.

She endured his scrutiny, studying him at the same time. He knew full well there was a contrast, with him dressed all in black and towering over her.

“Lady High Priestess Evelyn.” Orrin's voice grated as he broke the silence. “The Baroness will dance when she learns of your capture.”

“No doubt.” Her voice was soft, yet stronger than he expected.

He was caught off guard by the blue of her eyes and the life that sparked there. No despair or fear. Just calm, light blue eyes like a clear sky. Uneasy, he continued. “She will return to the Keep, and then your fate will be determined. Do you know what to expect?”

The Lady High Priestess lowered her eyes, and Orrin noted that the clasped hands were trembling ever so slightly.

“Rape, torture.” She paused for the barest moment. “Death.”

“Yet you do not fear,” Orrin said.

“I fear.” Her voice was quiet. “I fear the pain and rape. As all do.” Orrin caught a glimpse of her blue eyes and a flash of humor in them. “I do not fear death. I suspect I will welcome it.”

Orrin frowned. “There will be no rescue, Priestess.”

Her head came up, her eyes widened, and she laughed, a clear sound that rang against the stones. “Well do I know that, sir.”

Orrin stared at her, still hearing the echoes of the laughter from the surrounding walls, the first honest laugh he'd heard in many years.

The prisoner made as if to rise, but had some difficulty. Without thinking, Orrin extended his hand in its black leather glove. She looked up in surprise, but accepted his hand and assistance. She wasn't tall; the top of her head came to the level of his eyes.

As she stood, Orrin saw that her white robes were stained where she had knelt on the damp floor. The robes were heavy ones, thick and white with gold trim. There was a flicker of silver on the woman's hand, a ring of some kind.

She stepped back from him and clasped her hands together again, her face composed.

The brief glimpse of humor was gone. “I take it, then, that you are Blackhart, Scourge of Palins?”

“I am.” Orrin gave her a nod. “As you are the leader of the rebellion and the creator of the false prophecy.”

Ah, that made her eyes narrow. “Hardly as false as the Usurper and his promises.”

“His title is Regent.” Orrin gave her a grim look. “I’ll not argue the point, Lady High Priestess. I have you, and I’ll use you to whatever advantage I can.”

The lady gave him a thoughtful look. “What advantage can there be to my torture and death?”

He frowned, angry that he’d given away too much. “We’ll see, when the Baroness returns.”

The priestess sighed, looking around at the rough cell. “I half hope it’s sooner, rather than later.”

She looked at him then and met his gaze, and somehow he knew that for all her calm appearance, she was doing all she could to hold the terror at bay. He frowned again, suddenly uncomfortable. “Guard!”

The door opened, and Orrin once again bent down to emerge from the cell. He waited for the door to close before he spoke. “This prisoner is to be moved.”

“Moved?” Mage asked. His uncertainty was to be expected, since Orrin himself was surprised at his snap decision. He wasn’t sure where the impulse had come from.

“Am I bewitched?” Orrin asked the lad sharply.

Mage opened his eyes wide, then muttered a few words, casting his spell. His eyes

glowed for an instant. “No, Lord Blackhart.”

Orrin grunted. “It makes no sense to keep you down here, watching her. Have her taken to one of the tower bedrooms, and secure her there.” Orrin turned and leaned in, nose to nose with the guard. “The prisoner is not to be touched, and nothing is to be removed from her person. That privilege belongs to the Baroness. Am I understood?”

The guard jerked his head, clearly aware of Orrin's reputation as a killer. Orrin spun on his heel, satisfied that he would be obeyed, and left the cell, climbing the stairs out of the darkness. Elanore would be pleased, and upon her return the Priestess would die. But in the meantime, she could be housed in a better location, easier for his men to guard. Made no sense to go to great length to capture her, then lose her to illness. No telling when the Baroness would return from her little jaunt.

As he climbed the stairs, back toward the air and the light, he admitted to himself that he felt odd. Suddenly, he longed for something he had not wanted or thought about in a long time.

He wanted to hear that laugh again.

Chapter Two

She was terrified.

Evelyn's hands clenched tight as she watched Blackhart leave. It was all she could do not to fling herself at the door and pound on it, begging for her freedom.

She closed her eyes and forced herself to hold still as muffled voices came through the door. With any luck her captor hadn't seen her terror. Her heart was pounding in her chest and her mouth was so dry it was a miracle she'd been able to form words at all.

She was exhausted, which made it harder to keep the fear at bay. At the very least, she could die with dignity. After all, she was a priestess, wasn't she? A high priestess, for all that.

Little good that did her now.

She licked her lips and made herself take in a slow, shuddering breath. Lord of Light, this place stank. Of fear, of the undead these people had raised, of foul fluids and rot. She let the air out slowly and took another breath, trying to relax her tight shoulders. With a grimace, she knelt on the damp floor. Prayer would help.

Not that she truly expected aid, divine or otherwise. She'd brought this on herself. The Chosen had warned her of the danger, but she'd blithely continued on, sure of her path. Evelyn could see her own arrogance now, to her shame. She could only pray that it would not harm their cause, would not prevent the Chosen from claiming her rightful throne.

Blackhart had surprised her with his talk of a rescue. The look on his face when she'd laughed right out loud - nonplused was the best way to describe it. There was some degree of satisfaction to that, if a prisoner could be said to have any.

Evelyn rolled her shoulders, trying to relax them, and took another conscious breath. She swallowed, too, to wet her mouth. "Prayer focuses our thought on the Gods, and opens our minds to their will and their wishes," she whispered, reciting an old lesson her mother had taught her, trying to regain her calm. "Give your heart and mind to the Lord of Light and the Lady of Laughter and they will answer, in ways seen and unseen."

Focus on the Gods. Easy to say, but hard to do, when the clawing fear in her gut threatened to take her by the throat.

Nonetheless she closed her eyes and tried to pray.

"Hail, gracious Lord of the Sun and Sky, Giver of Light . . ."

Evelyn opened her eyes just enough to see the flame of the candle they'd left with her. The tiny thing barely held back the darkness of these depths. Of course, it was more for their convenience than her comfort, so they could keep an eye on their prisoner.

Not that she could do anything. Her gaze fell to the manacles around her wrists, gray and tight. Whatever they were, they somehow drained her magic away, leaving her helpless to cast any spell. She had never heard of such a thing, but any power she could summon was gone in an instant, as if pulled into the metal. Its effect could also explain the sick feeling in her stomach, and the headache. Maybe it wasn't just her fear.

If they removed the chains, it was possible that she might be able . . .

She was fooling herself, and she needed to admit it. Even if she could win free of the

chains, there were guards, both human and odium, between her and freedom. It would take precious seconds to cast a spell and open a portal, and they'd probably be upon her before she could escape.

Odium. Her stomach clenched at the thought. She'd never fought them, but she'd seen what they could do to a man. Seen men rendered, their flesh torn, seen the horrible gaping wounds that the odium inflicted with tooth and nail.

Soulless ones, the odium were, made worse because they were created from the living, their souls stripped from their bodies. They fought with no need for food or rest. Worse, their filthy hands and rotting flesh left corruption behind in the wounds that they made. A man could survive a battle with but a scratch, and be dead in days when the wound soured and spoiled.

Odium could be stopped only by severing the neck or chopping the limbs. Or killing the one who created it. She shivered. These people created and used them. What would they do to her?

The gnawing fear rose again, and she looked at the candle again. Her father had taught her the first of her spells with a candle. The old lessons helped her to concentrate, and she closed her eyes once more. *"Hail, gracious Lord of the Sun and Sky, Giver of Light and Granter of Health. Your priestess beseeches you for forgiveness . . ."*

For her pride, her arrogance, her stupidity. For putting five years of work and toil at risk by allowing herself to be captured. The fear in her stomach turned to sick worry. Did her fellow rebels know she had been taken? Would any of the High Barons withdraw their support of the Chosen? Their forces were in the field, and there was no turning back now . . .

"Hail, gracious Lord of the Sun and Sky, Giver of Light and Grantor of Health. Your

priestess beseeches you for mercy . . . ”

For High Baroness Elanore would have none. She had plotted with the Usurper to ambush the other High Barons and, in the confusion, attack the Barony of Farentell, laying waste to the land and taking its people as slaves, or worse. For the Baroness had turned to necromancy, had raised the odium, using slaves and prisoners that Blackhart and her armies had brought her.

With Farentell destroyed, they turned their attentions to Summerford and Athelbryght. Lord Fael of Summerford had fought them off, with the assistance of the armies of Lady Helene of Wyethe.

Athelbryght had been destroyed, its Baron left dying in the mud of his farmstead. The memory of finding her cousin, Lord Josiah, there in the mud swept over Evelyn. She'd decided there and then that she'd find a way to restore the throne.

So many years of work, so much effort. They were so close.

Evelyn should have known that the talk of plague in the hills had been a lure to trap her, but she'd felt compelled to aid those she'd thought in need. The Archbishop had sent her . . .

Who had betrayed her?

There was a scrabbling sound in one of the corners. Evelyn flinched, darting a glance to the side. Rats, probably.

She shuddered, and licked her dry lips.

“Hail, gracious Lord of the Sun and Sky, Giver of Light and Grantor of Health. Your priestess beseeches you for aid . . . ”

For the cause, for the warriors, but especially for the children she'd rescued from the

Usurper's schemes. They were safe, hidden in Soccia. She'd protected them, loved them these last five years, and she could see their grief as she tasted her own in the back of her throat.

They'd be devastated, and had she thought of that? Had she given a moment's thought to . . .

“Hail, gracious Lord of the Sun and Sky, Giver of Light and Grantor of Health. Your priestess beseeches you for courage . . . ”

Courage for all. For every man taking up arms against the Usurper. For the children, for the Chosen, for herself. She swallowed hard as pictures of what they'd do to her flashed in her mind. And truth be told, what she feared most was the waiting. It was one thing to face death. It was another thing entirely to kneel in a cell with nothing to do but anticipate what was to come.

She brought herself back, focused on her breathing, tried to ease tense muscles, tried to let the fear go. Tried to pray . . .

“Hail, gracious Lord of the Sun and Sky, Giver of Light and Granter of Health. Your priestess beseeches you for grace . . . ”

For the grace to wait, and endure. As long as she had to. For the grace to hide her fears from that man. Lord Blackhart, Scourge of Palins, who'd aided the High Baroness and the Usurper.

Odd. She'd expected him to be tall and brooding when he'd filled the door of her cell. But for the inhuman monster he was reported to be, his eyes held a weariness that she hadn't expected to see. Those eyes had been dark, grim . . . she'd no hint of color in the dim light, other than the black he wore. Still, it was . . . unsettling. She'd expected cruelty and hate. How odd to think such a monster might have feelings beyond a lust for power.

Was she guilty of that as well? Of assuming that all of her enemies were monsters?

Evelyn's face grew warm. She'd worked so long to unseat the Usurper, to bring the prophecy to fruition, had she fallen into the trap of blind hatred of an enemy? Was that what took Blackhart down his path of darkness?

As she was lost in thought, the grating of the door took her by surprise. Her head snapped up in an instant. Two men with torches stood in the doorway.

“On your feet.”