

THE SEAL
OF
THROKAR

THE SUNDERED TREE: BOOK ONE

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CHAPTER ONE

FOUR CORPSES DANGLED from the branches of a dead oak. Blood still dripped from fingertips, hair, and feet. Steam still rose from the bodies of their protectors, tumbled together beneath them like storm-driven wheat.

Quin swallowed hard and glanced at Sarael.

The Avatar of Healing hunched miserably at the edge of the clearing, mud clutching at the hem of her plain gown. She appeared to be a few years older than Quin, no more than thirty, although her real age spanned centuries. Her face had gone ashen.

Quin unpinned the wool cloak from her brigandine and swung it around the other woman's shoulders. "We can't stay--"

"Cut them down. Please. Just ... get them down."

"We'll come back. After we find the others, and those cultists move on." Quin scanned the forest. The leaves and branches drooped with water, and the patter of heavy drops landing on the thick pad of fallen leaves could easily mask the footsteps of an enemy. She tightened her grip on the sword hilt and took Sarael's hand, pulling her toward the game trail that provided the only easy access in or out. Any other direction would require hacking at brambles with a blade.

A bird erupted from the underbrush, bellowing a challenge to the sky and shaking a torrent of water loose. Something startled the creature into flight. Quin stepped in front of Sarael, sword drawn. She heard nothing but blood and rain, and the pounding of her heartbeat

in her ears. "Let's go."

Down the path, another cascade of water accompanied a curse. "It was right around here we left 'em." The voice was faint.

Quin hitched her breath. Tree cultists. If she and Sarael ran, the sound of their passage would alert everyone to their presence. No choice but to hide. The oak had split and soured years before and sported no leafy canopy that might conceal them. The wide trunk might hide them, but only if their pursuers were blind or fools. How many were there? Could Quin fight?

Sarael's eyes widened. "Go! I'll ... I'll try to stop them."

"I'm supposed to protect *you*." Her gaze returned to the pile of bodies, and she paused.

Sarael paled further. "May blessed Yhellania forgive us."

Quin huffed. "She likes you. You'll be fine." She pulled the reluctant woman over to the tree and pushed her down between the corpses of the soldiers and the blackened trunk. "You have to admit, they'd never think to find you there." She covered Sarael's dress and pale hair with the cloak and shifted the body of a scarlet-clad man over her hips and legs. Quin tried to smile, but bile rose in the back of her throat. She resisted the urge to scrub her hands clean. Liquid dripped on them from above. Hot and cold.

A lighter voice laughed. "Dalanar is quick to send us out in this weather. I notice he ain't so quick to join in."

Quin jerked upright and turned toward the path. Dalanar was here? Had he been in the village that betrayed the slaughtered Servant-priests to the cultists? Had it been him?

"Keep your damned tongue civil," the first voice growled, "if you don't want it burnt to ash. Sorcerers don't have a sense of humor."

"I warn't joking." The lighter voice sounded baffled. "He's on our side, anyway."

The growling man grunted. "Maybe."

"Quinthian," Sarael's tone held ice. "I order you to hide."

"But--" Dalanar was tucked up warm and cozy at some inn not three miles from her. This was probably the closest she'd ever been to the rotting sorcerer, and she had no way to get at him.

"Now."

Quin clenched her teeth and wiggled into the morbid pile, her skin shuddering away from contact. These were her friends, her companions, and her peers. That they passed into the realm of death shouldn't change anything. She gulped down nausea. The proscription against touching the dead was too strong. She couldn't do this. A scream built inside her chest.

"Hush, child." Sarael's fingers brushed against Quin's arm. "Hush."

Warmth and comfort flooded through Quin like sinking into a hot bath on a misty day, making her sleepy. She shouldn't be tired. They might have to fight for their lives at any moment. She tried to pull away, but failed.

"This will only work if they don't burn the bodies," Quin whispered.

"Tree cultists never burn Yhellani bodies."

Five people dressed in oil skin cloaks and hoods sauntered into the clearing. Only smudges remained on their foreheads; rain had washed clean the ash-drawn tree symbols cultists used to identify themselves. Too many for Quin to take on alone. She might beat two. Possibly, hold off three-- long enough for Sarael to escape. Not five.

Where were the other members of Sarael's party? The guardsworn and the Servants? Had they survived the attack? The ambush forced Quin and Sarael into the forest. Misfortune or divine will led them to the site of the massacre. There had been no sign of their companions. Quin's stomach clenched. They couldn't be dead. Barrand would never let that happen. She smiled grimly at the thought of his reaction to her method of hiding Sarael. Quin would gladly endure his lecture on the respect due an Avatar as long as he was safe. As long as they all came through this alive.

"Doesn't look like any of them've been here." The light-voiced man threw back his hood to reveal an unlined face and thinning hair.

A cultist with a jutting black beard kicked one of the bodies to Quin's right. "They always come for their dead meat." The gruff-

voiced man. He called over his shoulder to the others, "We wait." He pointed at the young man. "Go to the end of the trail and hide. Whistle if you see anyone coming."

"Aww, Cass--"

"Quit whining. It's your turn."

The young man shuffled down the trace muttering to himself.

Four. Could Quin kill them before the boy returned? She'd have the advantage of surprise.

Two of the hooded figures began swinging the suspended bodies back and forth, setting them spinning like obscene children's toys.

"Fine bunch of crab apples." A female cultist brayed with laughter.

Hanged Servants had been nicknamed "crab apples" for the color they turned when their pain had ended and they were allowed to begin dying. It had been an abundant year for the terrible harvest. Quin's cheeks burned and fury grayed out the edges of her vision. The two cultists stood so close to where she hid, the hems of their cloaks brushed her boots. They would die. She would send them to meet their foul god in person.

One of them poked the smallest of the Servants in the thigh with a sword. In life, the woman had been a quietly competent healer, with a knack for dice that left a number of guardsworn penniless. Quin blinked away tears.

Sarael made a dangerous sound low in her throat. Her grip on Quin's arm hardened. *Ob, no. Not now.* Quin grabbed for the avatar, but the woman shifted out of reach. She wasn't in control any longer. The goddess was coming.

The sword tip ripped the Servant's robe open. "We shoulda left them naked. Yhellania likes that sort of thing."

Sarael erupted from her hiding spot with an animalistic roar, eyes blazing with white fire.

Quin had only seconds to act. She heaved aside the sheltering bodies and leapt to her feet, shoving three feet of steel between the ribs of the cultist closest to her. Without pausing, she swung around and decapitated the second.

The goddess glowered out through Sarael's eyes, incandescent with wrath. Her body straightened, the unassuming woman taking on the bearing of an empress. Yhellania's divine presence thrust everyone down, grinding them into the wet earth with heads bowed and air forced from their lungs. "*Who has done this to my children?*" The avatar's hair swirled around her, blown by eddies of power.

Quin turned her head to one side to avoid a puddle, but mud oozed into her ear. She sucked in a breath and hoped the goddess relaxed her hold before she passed out. "These ... cultists, Great Lady."

The cultists whimpered somewhere nearby.

The air crackled and hissed. "*Where is Barrand? Why are you not in Csiż Luan?*"

The pressure eased enough for Quin to take a breath. "We were separated by an ambush. Dalanar knew we were coming, and--"

The goddess scanned the dead. The glow from her eyes cast deep shadows into the woodland beyond. "*This does not look like Dalanar's work.*"

"It's Dalanar who locates your Servants. Dalanar who passes the information on to the cultists. If we stop him, we can slow or even prevent these massacres." Quin managed to sound calm. This was her last hope of getting permission to kill the sorcerer; Sarael and Barrand had already forbidden it. If she convinced Yhellania, who could object?

Yhellania peered down at Quin, the goddess' regard pressing like a mountain against her spine.

"*Kill them, Quinthian. We shall discuss your hatred of Dalanar another time.*"

"He's so close! We--"

"*Now.*"

The pressure lifted. Quin leapt up, the sudden weightlessness giving her energy. She drew the dagger from the sheath at her lower back and raised her sword. Would the one on the right throw her axe before the bearded man charged?

The cultists remained motionless.

Quin paused. They were to fight as the goddess demanded. Were they surrendering?

It took several moments to realize that they remained trapped by Yhellania's presence.

"But, they can't fight."

"Are you defying my command?"

"No, I ..." The cultists deserved to die, probably more gruesome and painful deaths than Quin could deliver, but to simply kill them when they had no chance to defend themselves? It wasn't right.

Quin shook her head. She was being a hypocrite. The cultists she had slain moments before had no chance to defend themselves, either. That hadn't been a fair fight. This was ... different.

How could the goddess of healing and fertility ask this of her? How could she disobey?

Reluctantly, Quin moved toward the bearded cultist. Cass? The man's eyes were wide with terror. He had shown no mercy to the Servants still swinging from their makeshift gallows. She gripped the hilt tighter, attempting to muster her resolve. Quin had never executed an incapacitated enemy. A prisoner. She was a soldier, not a headsman. The cultist stared at her with helpless resignation.

"You disappoint me, Quintbian. Kill them. Now." The words held divine compulsion.

Quin's resistance evaporated.

With two strokes of her blades, the cultists lay dead, their blood dripping into the soil to mix with that of their innocent victims. Quin retched when Yhellania's command faded. She fell to her hands and knees, weapons discarded by her side.

"These sights cause Sarael great pain. See to her." The goddess gestured at the corpses of the Servants and the soldiers beside them. In a flare of light, they disappeared, leaving only sparks rising to the leaden sky.

The crushing presence of Yhellania vanished, and the glow faded. Sarael alone occupied the space vacated by the goddess. Quin rose with a curse. She wiped her face on the last dry spot on her shirt and attempted to tuck a tendril of dark hair back into a braid.

Her brigandine was covered with mud. She swiped at it, but only

succeeded in smearing the muck around. It would take weeks to scrape the filth from the leather plates. Her conscience might never come clean.