

## Chapter One

The sound of the scream faded as Ursula sat up.

In her sleep-fogged state, she had only a moment to wonder if she had dreamt the noise before reality burst through the front door in a tangle of swords and bodies. She grabbed at her thin sheet, cowering behind its non-existent protection. A soldier in full leather armor fought with one of the men from her village. They crashed across the small room, destroying weeks of tailoring as lace and brocade, velvet and felts spilled to the floor to be trampled beneath their muddy boots.

Ursula peered over the sheet, recognizing the baker's son, Kars. Since Donal of Colney, a self-proclaimed rebel, had come through Theara to preach against the king's excesses, Kars and other villagers of his ilk had fancied themselves a militia. They strutted about the village, crude iron swords on their hips, bullying any who crossed their path, pretending a level of superiority over the unarmed peasants who had birthed them.

She saw now that Kars's skill with the rusty weapon was sorely lacking compared to his opponent. He evidently noted the disparity, too, as he put the sewing table between himself and the soldier, tiny eyes wide with fright as they scanned for an easy escape.

"Die like a man or run like a craven," the soldier said. "Which will it be, boy?"

Kars's complexion curdled, and his sword arm shook. He wildly feinted in one direction, then the other before lifting the edge of the table to throw it at his attacker with a strength born of panic.

The soldier turned, taking the brunt of the force on his shoulder, ribbons and threads raining through the air to festoon his armor.

In two steps, Kars was at the shattered door. He cringed back at a shadow crossing his escape path. Unable to defend against or evade the attack, he cried out in agony. In the dim grayness of dawn, Ursula gasped as a shaft of metal pierced his body, the steel shiny with blood.

"Are you well?" the newcomer called past the dying man.

"Aye," the soldier said, brushing material scraps from his person.

Ursula watched with numb horror as the sword jerked free, and Kars collapsed in a silent heap in the doorway.

"Cap'n says to clear the place of combatants and make your way to the inn." He stuck his head in the door, finally noting his companion's appearance. "You're looking mighty dainty there, Berto."

Berto yanked silk brocade from where it caught in his armor, ignoring the man's laugh. "Shut your hole."

His fellow soldier raised his sword in ironic bloody salute and disappeared from Ursula's view.

The soldier, free of the oddment of sewing, scanned the room, his gaze falling upon her. Ursula swallowed, barely hearing the gulp past her rampaging heartbeat. Fresh terror swept over her at his approach. She scrambled backward on her pallet until she was firmly wedged in the corner by the fireplace, her sheet held in a white-knuckled grip.

"Are you going to give me trouble?" Berto asked, his voice growling.

Ursula vigorously shook her head, unable to speak.

"Is there anyone else here?"

She nodded.

He stiffened at her answer, casting a glance about the disaster of a room. "Who? Where are they?"

Ursula's mouth worked, but she produced no voice. She squeaked when he grabbed the collar of her dress and pulled her to her feet.

"Who, damn it all? Tell me, or I'll spit you where you stand!"

Her bladder released, the smell of urine mingling with mud and blood. He cursed again, shaking her. "My...my mistress," she finally whispered. "Upstairs."

"Mistress?" Berto peered closely at her. With a quick yank, he ripped her dress and spun her around, revealing the slaver's tattoo on her shoulder.

Ursula's breath came in short, pained pants as she awaited the thrust of either his sword or his manhood. Instead, he brought her back around by her shoulders and forced her to her knees. Perhaps he wanted her to use her mouth instead. Some men preferred such acts.

"If you're wise, you'll remain here until this is over."

Her head whirled as he left her. He found the stairs at the back of the room, and she heard his firm step as he made his way to the second floor. Whether or not her mistress had been awakened by the invasion of her home was debatable. The old woman's hearing was very bad, and she slept soundly as a rule.

Dizzy over her momentary reprieve, Ursula crouched on the floor, resting her forehead on the beaten earth, breathing great lungfuls of air. Her immediate danger past, her heart slowed enough that the drumming did not roar in her ears, allowing other sounds to come to her. Outside the walls, men yelled commands, metal clashed against metal, and people screamed as they fought and died. The entire village was under attack. Over the harsh copper aroma of Kars's blood and the stench of her fear and urine, smoke tickled her nostrils.

Above her, she heard her mistress's scream. The sound was cut off by an abrupt cough and a heavy thump. The soldier's tread crossed the room before returning to clamber back downstairs. Ursula, shaking so hard she could barely move, raised her head to watch his advance.

"Sorry, lass. The old woman took a fright. I think her heart went."

She nodded mutely as he passed her, the death of her owner hardly registering. He turned to pin her with a glare, and once more fear flooded through her.

"Now, you'll stay put?" he asked, pointing his sword at her.

"Aye," she said and then repeated the word loud enough for her voice to carry.

"Right then." Berto stepped over Kars and left, presumably to join his comrades at the inn.

Trembling, Ursula gathered her sheet, wrapping it about her shoulders as she settled in to wait. She ignored the sight of Kars, happy that at least he stared at the ceiling in death instead of at her. With a slight turn, she faced the stone of the fireplace, forcing herself to concentrate on the pattern of rock and mortar instead of the cries of anguish outside.

This attack was really no surprise. Everyone knew the king's army camped nearby. Soldiers on horseback had come two days ago, demanding to see the headman and his counselors. When they were not produced, the captain in charge — a somber man with hair plaited into a thick yellow braid — had given the villagers one day to find them and turn them over to his general.

Rather than follow the man's orders, the people of Theara had assembled and plotted a defense against the coming attack. The leaders of the village had foolishly thought the small group of soldiers would return to make further demands and planned an ambush for them. No one had expected to receive the full brunt of military force over their pompous resistance.

The smell of smoke grew stronger, and Ursula heard the sharp crackle of flames. Most of the fighting had swept past the hovel, leaving only the faint moans and sobs of the wounded and mourning. Approaching dawn turned the sky gray outside, making it a bit easier to see a wisp of smoke slipping through the cracks of a shuttered window. As she stared, the cloud grew thicker, interfering with her vision.

She did not think the soldier meant for her to roast like a goose for a mid-winter festival. Still, she remained frozen in place, uncertain of what to do until she saw the red of flame licking the edges of the shutter.

Her terror now a familiar beast, Ursula forced herself to crawl toward the door. Above her, the smoke thickened, its roiling blackness illuminated by flashes of fire. She sputtered at the acrid sting in her lungs. Her eyes watered in retaliation, forcing her to feel her way toward the exit. She did not realize how close she was until her hand landed on Kars's shoulder. With a gasp, she pulled away, rising to her knees. She coughed hard from the lungful of smoke she received. Steeling her nerves, she climbed over the corpse to freedom, doing her level best to ignore the waxy feel of dead skin and the chill of thickening blood.

Ursula continued on her hands and knees until she was well away from the heat, turning to look only when she had arrived at the wall of the smithy across the lane. The upper floor of the seamstress's hovel was engulfed in flames, reaching into the lightening sky. It appeared that the bakery next door had caught fire; no doubt the ovens had already been fired up for the morning's bread when the attack occurred. With no one able to run a bucket brigade from the village well, the fire had spread to the surrounding buildings.

Smoke filled the air, putrid with the smell of burning flesh, flames casting orange splatters against a sky growing lighter with impending dawn. The fighting and the dying still clashed on the northern edge of the village as the last of the resistance was dealt a deathblow. Bodies littered the ground about her, illuminated by the flames in their last acts of defiance and defense.

"Well, what have we here?"

Immediate terror rose to clog Ursula's throat far more effectively than the smoke. Someone hauled her to her feet, and she found herself being eyed by three filthy soldiers, their eyes gleaming at their discovery.

"What do you wager she's a virgin?" one asked, tugging hard at her hair before sending her reeling into the second man.

"Are you a virgin, sweetling?" he asked, holding her squirming body against his. A bloody, dirt-caked hand latched onto her chin and twisted her head from side to side. "I don't know, Cor," he said. "She's too pretty to be a virgin. One of these farm boys has got her first, no doubt."

The third grabbed her out of his companion's grasp, a meaty hand clamping hard on her breast. She cried out in pain, and he laughed. "P'rhaps we should check," he suggested. "Just to be sure." Getting enthusiastic agreement from his friends, he threw her to the ground. "Hold her!"

"Why d'you get her first?" Cor complained. "I saw her first!"

Ursula tried to roll to her knees and crawl away only to be dragged, shrieking, back into the fray.

"Because I outrank both of you," the third man stated, fumbling with his trousers. "Get her legs or get the hell out of here!"

With a grumble, Cor fell to his knees, grabbing at her kicking feet.

Between them, they tore Ursula's homespun garments to shreds, roughly fondling her in the process. She knew what would happen next; she had no illusions that she could survive the attentions of three of them. Terrified, she kicked mightily, causing their leader to fall backward on his ass. She almost escaped their clutches only to be tripped and pounced upon before she could make two strides.

"Bitch!" he cursed, breeches hanging at his ankles. "I'll make you pay for that!" With three powerful blows, he knocked the fight out of her, bruising her face and bloodying her nose. Her senses dulled, she barely registered his weight or the feel of his hairy legs upon hers.

Before the soldier buried his manhood into the semi-conscious woman, Azrael yanked him up and backward. Within moments, she'd pinned his arms and had a blade beneath his penis. Around them, soldiers eased out of the gray dawn, their breastplates showing the mark of her personal guard. The woman on the ground, released by her startled captors, made a sluggish attempt to escape only to be hauled to her feet by the newcomers.

"What are you doing?" Azrael demanded in a cold voice.

"Nothing, General," the man stuttered, his erection deflating over the dagger. "We was just having some fun."

"Fun?" she asked, wiggling the blade, causing the man's penis to swing. "It doesn't appear that she's enjoying your play time." From the side she watched his mouth open and shut with a snap. "You three belong to Atol's squad?"

The two other men kneeling before her nodded quickly. "Aye, General," one said, voice barely above a whisper.

"I don't recall giving orders to have fun." She nicked the man's genitals, hearing him whimper. "My orders were to take the village and round up the people for judgment. Am I correct?"

The one in her arms kept silent until she lifted the knife, cutting deeper. "Aye, General!" he gasped, standing up on his toes in an attempt to avoid the blade.

"It would behoove you to follow orders." She released him. As he stumbled forward, he instinctively reached for his crotch. She brought the blade up, cutting through his manhood. Her former soldier fell to his knees, holding his now severed penis. Slumping over, he wailed, blood splashing his thighs.

Shivering, the remaining pair of transgressors unconsciously clutched at their genitals as they stared at their comrade. The woman slumped in the guards' grip sobbed loudly.

Azrael watched the writhing man with disinterest for a moment before turning to the others. She held up her dagger, dawn and firelight reflecting in its reddish streaks.

“Who’s next?”

Several moments later, Azrael cleaned her blade on a scrap of cloth. She turned her back on the three men bleeding from her actions. “Suma, keep a guard on them. If they survive to nightfall, execute them.”

“Aye, General.” The captain pointed at two of his men who saluted at his unspoken command. “The battle is won; the prisoners are being rounded up. What are your orders?”

“Separate the men from the women and children, then assemble them.” She inhaled deeply, looking at the pale blue sky in the east. “Keep a watchful eye on the women. Cull any dissidents from the herd during judgment; they’ll join the punished.”

“What about her?”

For the first time, she actually looked at the crying peasant still held by two of her guard. She stepped closer, studying the woman, who attempted to gather her tattered dress to cover herself — a futile prospect all things considered. Despite the blood and dirt, her features were even and promised she would clean up well. Azrael felt a spark of interest ignite in her groin. At the very least, Midia could use the company.

“Keep her apart. If she should protest, send her with the punished.” She fingered a lock of the woman’s mahogany hair. “If she survives judgment, bring her to my tent.”

“Aye, General,” Suma said, saluting.

“Dismissed.”

All but two of the soldiers left, their leader following, leaving three of their brethren slowly bleeding in the cool morning air.

Azrael mounted her horse, setting herself above the people so that all could see and hear her. The sun was well up, and gathered in the village square were the survivors of the morning’s battle. Less than a dozen men huddled in the center, circled by soldiers. The prisoners ranged in age from fourteen to fifty, and most were wounded. To one side, a larger group of women and children were surrounded by their own contingent of armed men.

The king had sent her to deal with a rebellion. Instead, she was forced to destroy an entire village of ignorant peasants. Smothering a wave of distaste, she urged her steed forward. “Citizens of Theara, attend me! You have harbored dissidents in your midst. I am here on the authority of King Shonal to wipe them out.”

An older woman spat in disdain. “There ain’t no dissidents here, woman!” she proclaimed, receiving an agreeable mumble from her friends. “So long’s we pay taxes, you’d do well to leave us be!”

Ignoring the outburst and subsequent squawking as soldiers pulled the woman from the crowd, Azrael continued, “Your village harbored Donul of Colney after he was declared a traitor. A legal representative of the crown was killed when he came to arrest him. Upon our arrival, rather than submit to questioning, your council chose to run and hide like cowards and you chose to fight the rightful representative of your liege.”

Her eyes raked over the assembled, glares and sullen faces squinting back. Pointing at the group of men and one woman, she said, “By the command of our liege, I, General Azrael of the Third Army, sentence these people to death.”

Several people paled at her name, gasps of surprise upon the air.

“Yes. I’m Azrael. King Shonal’s butcher,” she confirmed, eyeing them. “Know your enemy before you engage.”

Turning in her saddle, she waved a squad of soldiers closer. They led a cart full of long, sharpened poles. “These are the terms of your judgment: these men and that woman are to be executed. The surviving women will provide entertainment for my men tonight. They will then be sold into slavery, the proceeds used to repay the crown for this venture. The children will be relocated. It is done.”

The condemned were instructed to dig holes, one for each of them. Hours passed as this was accomplished. Those not toiling — the women and children — exhausted from the morning’s emotional turmoil, eventually settled down in what little shade they found and drowsed. Azrael watched the entire procedure from the back of her horse. She kept her emotions guarded, not letting anyone see her disgust for the upcoming proceedings. Still, she constantly scanned the crowd, noting who gave the telltale signs of a potential fight. Her bets were laid on two of the more solid women, intercepting many a hate-filled glance in her direction. Their loathing

mattered little to her. She had to remind herself that these people had already killed an agent of the crown and refused to give up the men responsible. They were all traitors now.

As the last hole was finished, a pair of soldiers went down the line to inspect them. Each depression was a man's forearm in diameter and about waist deep. As the pits met approval, shovels were taken from the workers, and their arms were trussed behind their backs at the elbows. Now it was time to strike, to ensure that no one here or in the outlying villages would ever forget the price of treason in the kingdom of Barentcia. The punishment would be brutal and vicious, but only such action could stem a beginning revolt. The king's order had been specific in that regard. She didn't have to like it; she simply had to carry out what she thought best to protect the realm.

Azrael dismounted, handing the reins to her standard-bearer. She removed her gloves and tucked them into her belt. Suma arrived at her side, a heavy mallet in his hands. She took the long-handled tool from him. This was something only she would do. Azrael had never asked her men to do what she could not. Nor would she allow them to be dishonored by her inability to carry out King's Law. Because of this, despite her distaste for the task ahead, she easily stepped toward the first prisoner in line.

Soldiers took him down, two to pin his shoulders and two to spread his legs. Three more retrieved a sharpened pole, laying it on the ground and sliding it up until the point nestled within the now struggling man's crotch.

"Let justice be done," she said, her voice carrying over the prisoner's begging.

Before her disbelieving audience, she swung the mallet with considerable force, impaling the man upon the pole.

The resulting pandemonium from the women was expected and immediately quelled. Three of them cursed her and the king. They would not stand down, fighting their captors and leaving Azrael no other choice. The women combatants joined their men in the punishment, as personal slaves belonging to Azrael's officers hastily dug pits for them. The soldiers came along behind Azrael, lifting each grisly adorned pole, planting it in its pit, and filling the hole.

Forcing herself to appear unmoved, Azrael ignored the screams of her victims as she continued down the line. She personally drove each post home and soon sported more gore than the men who held the prisoners down. Wiping sweat and blood from her eyes, she scanned the small forest of broken-limbed misery, ignoring the hysterical cries from the survivors behind her.

"Your orders, General?"

Glancing at her captain, Azrael said, "Keep the men busy. Have Razzu's cohort complete a thorough sweep of the area. Tenango will be in charge of salvaging supplies." *Business as usual.* "What word on the three this morning?"

"Two are dead. One remains." Suma shook his head. "It's doubtful he'll survive through the heat of the day."

Nodding, she frowned. "Since Atol has trouble controlling his troops, his men will clean up this mess. As usual, you're in charge of the slaves. Keep them safe until called for." Azrael turned and regarded the rest of the village square. "I saw that Indonatra roused the most dangerous opponents. His cohort is released from duty for the afternoon. Have them return to camp."

Suma bowed. "Aye, General. I'll see to everything."

"I'll want to see all my captains for debriefing before the evening meal," she reminded him as she walked to her horse.

"Aye, General."

Mounting, Azrael scanned her soldiers. "Swordsmen! You have fought well, yet our work is not finished. When the sun sets, a feast will be laid in your honor and entertainment will be supplied." She waved a hand at the gathered women, a smile she didn't feel touching her lips at the cheer from her troops. "Carry on," she ordered Suma before turning her mount and cantering out of the village.

At camp, Azrael dismounted before her tent, tossing the reins to a handler waiting attentively nearby. Glancing at her armor, she noted the gore of the morning's activities caked on the leather. She decided to forgo checking the wounded until she was clean and strode into her tent, ignoring the guards at the entrance who snapped to attention upon her approach.

Her quarters were austere and functional. To one side, a large wooden table squatted, surrounded by several chairs. It was half covered in maps and reports, evidence of the early morning planning session with her captains. The other side had been cleared, and a platter of

fresh food kept company with a simple ewer and tankard. Across the tent were a large bed and two chests that held her personal belongings. It was nowhere near as grand as her villa in Wrendon, but it was a home of sorts.

Further back, Azrael saw a steaming tub of water. On the canvas floor beside it, a woman knelt, awaiting her mistress.

The chill of Azrael's heart began to thaw, and a smile played upon her lips. If ever there was an indication of home, Midia was its epitome. Azrael had been given the body slave not long after her rise to the command of the Third Army. After ten years, Midia was as close as family.

"Midia," she said, her voice a caress, giving the slave the opening to speak.

Midia's expression was serene, marred only by a single line of worry between her brows. "Milady," she said. "Are you wounded?"

Azrael glanced at the rust-colored stains on her hands. "No, just a few scratches. Help me out of these things."

Midia flowed to her feet. Her clothing was diaphanous, a pale blue wrap that covered just enough to entice the imagination. "I've drawn you a bath, Milady, and brought food and drink," she said as she began removing the armor.

A sudden wave of bloodlust assailed Azrael as she watched her body slave work. It was all she could do to keep from crushing the woman to her, filth notwithstanding. Fighting it down, Azrael gritted her teeth against the soft touches. There was too much left to do this day — plenty of time to satiate her hunger later.

Midia did not acknowledge the sexually charged atmosphere, though her body betrayed her. Azrael's mouth watered at the flushed complexion of her slave and the puckered nipples so evident beneath the thin cloth of her dress. Despite an effort to focus on a list of things remaining to accomplish, her mind plagued her with visions of how she would relieve the ache of desire in the coming evening.

Midia carefully unbuckled the thick straps holding epauliere and elbow guards in place. Next she removed the heavy bracers at Azrael's forearms. Sharp knives were sheathed there, and she carefully set them on the table. Once Midia helped her out of her boiled leather and metal cuirass and draped it over a chair, Azrael removed her sword belt, placing it near the tub. She rubbed at the red lace marks embedded with rusty grime that crisscrossed her forearms and then stood silent while Midia knelt before her. As shin grieves and knee guards came away, another sudden wave of passion washed through her.

Midia reached for the mud- and blood-splashed boots, looking up at Azrael. "Milady?" she asked.

Standing on one foot, Azrael placed a hand on her slave's head to keep her balance as her boot was removed. The hair was soft and warm under her calloused hand, spun gold against her skin, and she couldn't help but caress it as Midia finished her task. Blood singing with desire, she growled. "Rise."

Midia stood, head lowered.

Taking the slave's chin, Azrael tilted her head up and looked into smoldering blue eyes, her thumb brushing a full lower lip.

"General Azrael?" called a soldier from outside.

"What is it?" she demanded.

Hearing the muted anger, the soldier cleared his throat. "The woman from the village, General. I was told to deliver her to your tent."

"Kemplak's Hells," Azrael cursed, releasing Midia's chin. "I'd forgotten about her." With a regretful sigh, she realized it would be a while before she could slake her battle thirst. Duty called. "Bring her in."

The guard swung the flap aside and entered, pulling the peasant woman inside. He deposited her two strides into the tent, saluted his general, and retreated.

Barefoot, Azrael approached. The woman trembled uncontrollably, though she had at least stopped crying. Her amber eyes seemed vacant. It was an expression Azrael recognized: The rest of the surviving villagers wore similar ones. She circled, studying her new acquisition. With a frown, she twitched a ragged piece of cloth aside at the woman's shoulder, noting a tattoo. "You're a slave."

"Aye, General," the woman whispered, dropping her eyes.

"Call me Milady. Only my soldiers refer to me as General."

Her shoulders hitched to avoid a blow. "Aye, Milady."

Azrael pushed aside more of the tattered rags, examining the olive flesh beneath. "How long have you been a slave?" she asked. "You've hardly any scars."

"Not long...Milady. Only two years." She cringed.

Unable to help herself, Azrael caressed the woman's waist and hip, sliding over the curve of her buttock. A pleasing shiver coursed along beneath her touch. "What's your name, girl?"

"Ursula, Milady."

She spent a few moments exploring the slave, checking the lay of muscle and bone, wrapping fingers in thick hair to tilt her head from side to side as she inspected her new property. "Your luck is good, Ursula," she said. Turning, Azrael waved Midia closer. "Bring Ursula to the slave tents. Get her cleaned up and fed, some decent clothes." Pausing, Azrael looked the new woman over with a critical eye. "Something in burgundy if you can find it. Return when you're finished."

"Yes, Milady." Midia curtsied and took Ursula's hand.

"Ursula."

The woman trembled. "Yes, Milady?"

"Obey Midia. She will instruct you on what I consider acceptable behavior."

"Aye, Milady." Ursula gave a shaky and awkward curtsy.

Midia asked, "Will you need anything before I leave, Milady?"

Azrael cupped her cheek, a faint smile twisting her lips. "No. Do as ordered. We'll continue later."

"Yes, Milady."

Azrael watched the two leave before sighing. Regretfully, she returned to the tub alone and finished undressing.