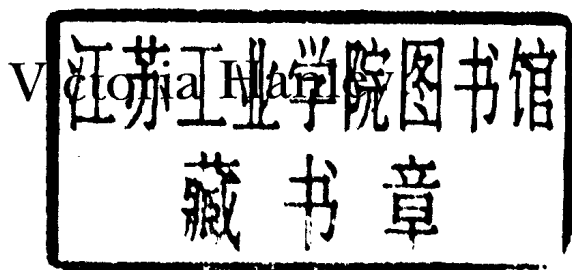


The Light of the Oracle



VICTORIA HANLEY

THE LIGHT OF THE ORACLE



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To Emrys and Rose

To Phoenix

And to Readers everywhere

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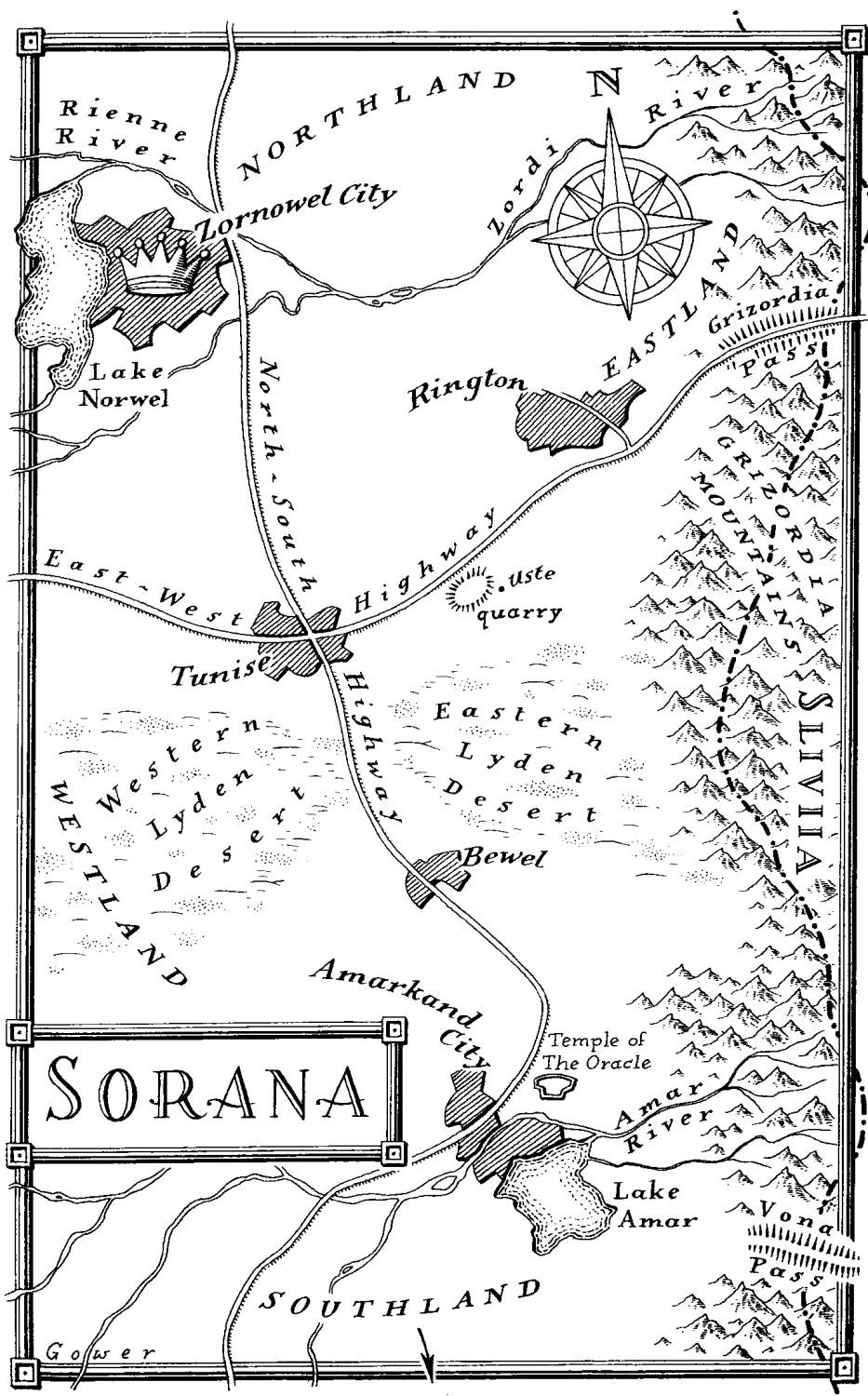
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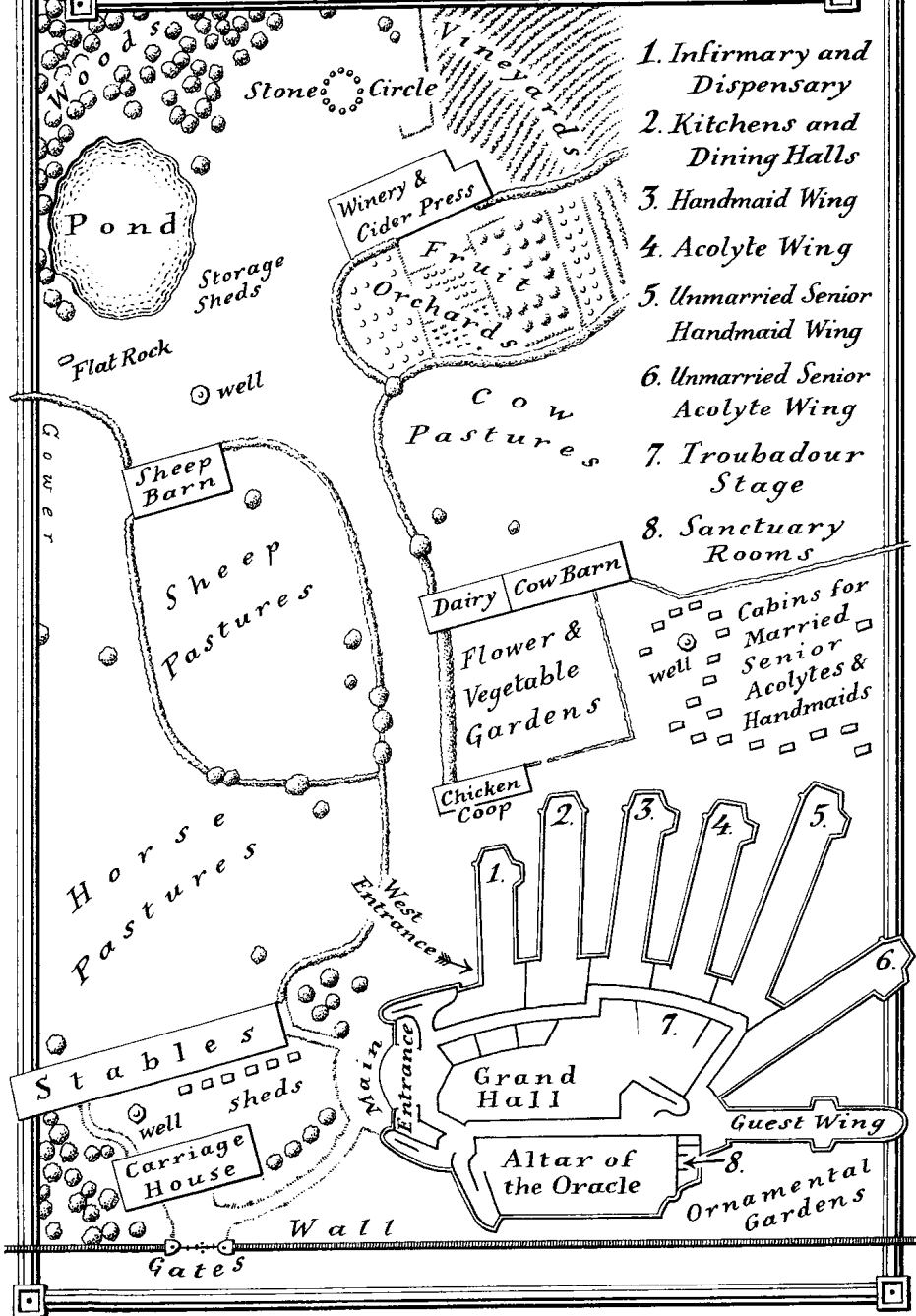
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Victoria Hanley



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 *kellice*, 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