

FORGOTTEN REALMS®



THE
PRIESTS

MAIDEN OF PAIN

KAMERON M. FRANKLIN





THE PRIESTS

PROLOGUE

The Year of the Bow

(1354 DR)

The two handmaidens carried Yenael between them. The pain was overwhelming, and the strength had left her legs. They had made her walk until she could not do so on her own and was forced to lean heavily on the two women supporting her.

Yenael was humiliated. It didn't matter what she was going through, what had been done to her. Pain was a Loviatan's tool, her constant companion. To have her sisters see her succumb to it like this shamed Yenael.

They brought her into the round, stone chamber beneath the manor, maneuvering her onto the slab of dark metal resting in the middle of the room. Its cool touch was a minor balm to her burning flesh. While one of the handmaidens lit each of the lanterns

that hung on the walls, the other secured the clamps around Yenael's ankles. It was an extra measure to make sure she did not endanger herself or anyone else should the last of her self-control fail.

No sooner had they finished than it started once more.

Yenael gritted her teeth against the pain, refusing to release it in the primal scream she could feel building in the back of her throat. She brought this on herself. She would endure the pain. No, she would conquer it. That was what was expected of her by her goddess.

Headmistress Mylra swept into the chamber as the wave of pain passed. She was dressed in the robes of her office, a red so deep it was almost black, highlighted by crimson and gold thread along the cuffs and hem. Her head was covered in a ceremonial hat of similar material that was shaped to resemble two horns protruding from the sides of her head, with a thin, gold charm hanging from each tip.

"How are things progressing?" the headmistress inquired.

"Swiftly, Headmistress," one of the handmaidens replied. "We should be finished here in a few minutes."

"Excellent. You are doing so well, Daughter," Headmistress Mylra said from her place behind one of the handmaidens at the foot of the table.

Pain gripped Yenael again, and she stiffened. She found no comfort in the headmistress's words. They weren't meant to comfort, though. The headmistress's tone conveyed that much. Giving comfort would have defeated the purpose and gone against all that Loviatar taught. Everything had been arranged to eliminate any possibility of relief from the pain. Even the comfort that came from her initial contact with the table

was gone. The metal had quickly absorbed Yenael's own body heat, causing her skin to stick to the smooth surface. Sweat flowed from every pore, pooling wherever her body touched the table top. The clamps bit into the flesh around her ankles like little insects.

No, Headmistress Mylra was not trying to comfort her. She was merely expressing her pride in Yenael, and her pleasure at seeing Yenael suffer.

"You realize, of course, that the ritual serves a dual purpose in your case," the headmistress continued as the level of pain subsided from a relentless wave crashing against the breakers to something more like the tide sliding across the sand. "Not only does it exemplify the pain that is inevitably inflicted upon us from the moment we enter this life, but it is also a fitting punishment for the lack of discipline you displayed, wouldn't you say, Sister Duumin?"

"Yes . . . uhn . . . Headmistress." Yenael grunted through another wave of pain. Strands of matted hair stung her eyes, but she paid them no mind. The contractions of her uterus, like a giant's hand crushing her lower abdomen, relegated everything else to the status of mere annoyance.

"I'm glad you agree. Your indiscretion has jeopardized our influence with the powers of this city."

Headmistress Mylra circled the crude table, the hem of her voluminous robes sweeping the dark stone floor of the candlelit chamber. Her right arm was folded across her torso, supporting her left elbow, while she idly tapped her lips with the index finger of her left hand. Her eyes held no mercy.

The headmistress was right. Yenael deserved this suffering, but it was all she could do not to cry out in agony. It was humbling to realize she was so weak. She prayed Loviatar would forgive her then laughed

at her own inanity. Loviatar did not forgive.

Yenael's laugh was cut off by a moan as another contraction hit her.

"The head is crowning," an attending handmaiden said. "Keep pushing, Sister."

Yenael took three short breaths and pushed. Her fists clenched into balls, nails biting into white flesh and drawing blood. Tears streamed from eyes squeezed tightly shut. Yenael felt something rip and nearly lost consciousness. From somewhere distant, she thought she could hear the screaming of tiny lungs.

"It's a girl."

"Congratulations, Sister Yenael." Headmistress Mylra took the newborn in her hands. A hint of pleasure flashed in Mylra's eyes, but her smile was ice cold. "It appears that Loviatar still favors you. Have you chosen a name?"

Yenael tried to lift her head to see the infant, but the movement only filled her sight with swirls of blackness. "Ythnel." She sighed.

"Welcome, Ythnel. May you suffer and deal suffering in kind." The benediction given, Headmistress Mylra passed the baby back to a handmaiden then nodded toward Yenael. "Clean her up, and see that she gets some rest. She has served well today."



The Year of the Tankard (1370 DR)

Saestra Karanok loved parties. She adored being the center of attention, receiving compliments on how beautiful her thick, dark tresses were; how the sparkle of her jeweled earrings set off the twinkle in her deep,

brown eyes; or how the sleeveless, full-length gown of light purple silk she wore made her look so much like her mother. Some said she was too vain; Saestra preferred to think it was her way of honoring a mother who died giving birth to her.

It was no different with this party. In fact, because it was her eighteenth birthday, Saestra seemed to have an unending line of well-wishers. She stood in the midst of a continuous swirl of friends and relatives, minor nobles and rich merchants, all trying their best to come up with dazzling and original remarks about her beauty and their desires for her continued health and happiness.

She paid them only nominal heed tonight, smiling and nodding absently at them as they passed. Her attention was elsewhere, on a small group of young men huddled a few feet to the right of where she stood in the great audience hall of the Karanok family palace. Her older brother, Naeros, was among the men, but it was not him she watched with interest. No, it was the young man next to him, Augustus Martiro, who kept drawing her eyes. He had a round, soft face, framed by thick waves of brown hair. A thin band of gold held his mane away from warm, brown eyes that reflected the broad smile he wore. She glanced away whenever their gazes crossed, only to return after she was sure he wasn't looking.

A chime sounded once, twice, and the audience hall quieted. Saestra recognized the signal and watched the single door at the far side of the hall. Moments after the second chime faded away, the door opened, and two regal figures strolled in. The first was Saestra's father, Jaerios. The firm set of his jawline and the dark curls slightly touched with gray at the temples gave him an air of confidence and wisdom. If his nose were not so

dominant, he would have been considered quite handsome. Saestra was glad she really did take after her mother.

The figure on Jaerios's arm made Saestra's normally dainty features twist involuntarily into a snarling pout of annoyance. Her twin sister, Kaestra, usually did not attend the parties the family threw in the palace. Unlike Saestra, Kaestra cared little for her looks and the attention garnered by them. She never made an effort to do anything with the long, thin strands of her mousy brown hair, simply letting them fall straight to the middle of her back. Her face was plain and hard, her complexion pale from hours spent buried in books. It didn't matter what others thought about Kaestra; they were sycophants to her.

Tonight, however, Kaestra's hair was pinned up, her cheeks had a healthy glow like sunlight through rose petals, and she wore a white silk gown with a flowing train that practically floated behind her. The pair climbed the dais at the back of the hall where the family sat whenever they presided over official occasions. Earlier that day, two new chairs had been added to the three that were there before. Jaerios stopped in the center of the dais and turned to face the gathered attendants.

"Welcome, everyone. I am so glad you could join our family in this celebration," Jaerios began. Saestra made her way forward in anticipation of her father's introduction, but halted, confused, as he continued without even glancing in her direction.

"There is always some sadness when a father's little girls grow up. But there is pride, too. And nothing makes me prouder than to announce my dear Kaestra's decision to join the church of Entropy."

Applause and murmurs of approval rose to meet

Jaerios's broad smile. Saestra could barely keep her jaw from dropping. What was going on? This was supposed to be her party, her night, but everyone was flocking to Kaestra now. Shock quickly turned to anger, yet Saestra could see no way of rescuing the evening. Frustrated, she stormed from the hall, stomped up the stairs, and slammed the door to her room.

She did this on purpose, Saestra fumed as she paced angrily. I knew she was always jealous. And this proves it. I can't believe she ruined my evening like this. I'll find some way to get her back.

A knock at the door interrupted Saestra's train of thought.

"Go away," Saestra growled.

"I'm sorry about the party, Saestra." It was Naeros, her brother.

"Why would you be sorry? This is the kind of thing you usually find funny."

"True. However, I'm not here to gloat."

"Oh? Don't tell me you stopped by to make me feel better."

"Actually, I'm just delivering a message, though it will probably have that effect."

"I doubt there is anything you could say that would change how I feel," Saestra sighed.

"Oh, I don't know about that. You remember Augustus, right? The man you were staring at all night." Saestra could practically hear Naeros leering on the other side of the door. She blushed. If Naeros had noticed, how many others had seen?

"Anyway, a bunch of us were going to head over to my tower. The party here is getting a bit too stuffy. Augustus begged off but wanted to know if you'd like to meet him over by the Crypts."

“Why would he want to do that?” Saestra was suddenly suspicious of Naeros. This wouldn’t be the first time her brother had tried to pull a prank on her. She wasn’t in the mood for any of his tricks tonight.

“How would I know? What do young couples normally do in cemeteries? I can’t believe I’m even discussing this with my sister. It’s bad enough I had to ask you for him.”

Saestra’s heart skipped a beat. It was true that lovers were known to stroll through the Crypts at night, sometimes stopping for other activities. Some of her friends had shared their firsthand experiences. If there was even a chance that Augustus wanted to meet her there. . . .

“So, what should I tell him?” Naeros was getting impatient. He probably was in a hurry to return to the new place Father had just built for him and get drunk with his friends.

“Tell him . . . tell him I’ll meet him there in one hour.”

“Will do. Have a good night.”

Saestra let go of her breath as she heard Naeros’s footsteps fade away. It was all she could do not to race out of her bedroom and make for the Crypts straight away. A lady did not rush off to a clandestine rendezvous with her lover, however. Saestra got up from where she sat at the edge of her bed and strode over to her vanity. Her hair was still immaculate, but she primped anyway. It would be cool outside in the early morning hours, so she needed something to cover her arms and shoulders. Saestra sorted through her wardrobe until she picked out the perfect wrap, its fur lining sure to keep her warm.

When she decided she had waited long enough to arrive fashionably late, Saestra slipped out of her

room and made her way back downstairs. Not wanting to be seen by anybody at the party, she used the servants' hall and let herself out one of the palace's side entrances. It was a balmy summer night, but Saestra tingled with enough excitement that gooseflesh rose on her arms. The moon was full in the cloudless sky, outshining the closest stars. Saestra could not ask for a more perfect setting. The evening had truly taken a turn for the better.

The Crypts was a large graveyard situated near the center of Luthcheq. It covered a block of land nearly three-quarters of a mile long and a quarter of a mile wide. Used almost exclusively by the nobility of the city, the grounds were dominated by sculpted mausoleums belonging to each house. Lesser nobles and some of the richest merchants rested in plots marked by ornate headstones near the front of the cemetery.

A fence of black iron bars, meant to keep the public out, wrapped around the exterior of the Crypts. Several of the bars had been bent in various places, however, granting entrance. Taxes funded the grounds keeping, and Saestra's father employed a large force of workers specifically to maintain the Crypts, but it seemed someone forced their way in as soon as old bars were replaced. Saestra figured that as long as no real damage was done to the property, it would probably go on that way.

Saestra slipped through the fence and glanced around for Augustus. The marble of the mausoleums glowed eerily in the pale moonlight, and she shivered involuntarily as her eyes moved across them. Saestra thought she saw someone peeking around the corner of one of the buildings, but when she looked back, there was no one there.

She was silently chiding herself for letting her

imagination play tricks on her when a cold hand grabbed her shoulder from behind. She started with a shriek, whirling about to see Augustus holding on to her as he came through the fence.

“Sorry.” He grinned. “Hope I wasn’t keeping you waiting too long.”

“No.” She quickly recovered. “Though don’t think I would have waited here much longer.”

“Of course not.” He still wore that broad smile Saestra remembered from the party. “You ever been to the Crypts before?”

“No,” Saestra answered, unable to think of anything but his beautiful, round face. She had been here before, when they laid her mother to rest. That was during the day, though. She’d never been here at night.

“I should show you our family’s mausoleum, then.” He clasped her hand in his and led her into the cemetery. They strolled past sepulchers of various shapes and sizes. Some were decorated with celestial figures escorting departed souls to their final resting places. Others were adorned with grotesque visages of stone meant to ward off evil spirits.

Saestra paid them little heed. Her mind was focused on the connection formed by Augustus’s hand wrapped around hers. Were her palms too sweaty? Could he feel her rapid heartbeat through the tips of her fingers?

“Hey, is that door open?” Augustus had stopped at the edge of a gravel path that wound its way up to a slant-roofed mausoleum. Saestra could see that the door, framed by a pair of Ionic pillars, was slightly ajar.

“Is that your family’s?” she asked.

“No, but let’s go check it out. Maybe there’s grave robbers inside.” He started forward but turned back

when Saestra didn't budge. "I was only kidding. Besides, I'd protect you. I'm sure there's nothing inside there bigger than a rat. Come on." He flashed that smile, and Saestra let herself be dragged along reluctantly.

When they reached the entrance of the mausoleum, Augustus motioned for Saestra to wait while he took a look inside. She hugged one of the columns as he disappeared into the darkness, putting the mass of marble between her and the open doorway. Time crawled while she chewed on her lower lip, waiting. It was eerily quiet. Then something moved inside the tomb, the faint sound of shuffling feet drifting out. Saestra tried to hide behind the column, but could not pull her eyes from the doorway. A shape appeared at the threshold, just beyond the edge of the moonlight.

Augustus stepped out, and Saestra let her breath go with an audible sigh.

"Don't do that," she scolded, moving out from behind the pillar to meet him.

"What?" The mischievous grin on his face belied the innocence in his voice. "It's empty inside, except for a couple of sarcophagi. Which are closed," he quickly added. "Come in with me."

Saestra bit her lip, hesitating for a moment before nodding her consent. Just inside the doorway was a small landing. They stood there for a few minutes, letting their eyes adjust, before descending a short flight of steps. By the faint traces of moonlight that barely pierced the darkness beyond the door, Saestra could make out two large, rectangular objects that occupied the center of the chamber. The thought of somebody's decaying remains still being inside the sarcophagi, just a few feet away, made her shiver.

"Are you cold?" asked Augustus.

He came up behind Saestra and held her to his chest. His arms were strong, and she felt secure with them wrapped around her. She turned in his embrace and looked up, meeting his gaze. Slowly, he leaned in. Saestra wet her lips with her tongue and closed her eyes.

A harsh, grinding noise immediately drew their attention to the thick stone door of the mausoleum. Someone was pulling it shut! Augustus bounded up the stairs but was too late. The last sliver of moonlight was cut off, and the pair was plunged into darkness as the door sealed with a solid thud.

“Hey! Open the door! Let us out!” Augustus shouted, vainly pounding the slab of marble.

“Are the young lovers scared?” a familiar voice taunted. “Enjoy your first night together. See you two in the morning.”

“Naeros, I hate you!” Saestra’s scream was met with muffled laughter.

“This isn’t funny, Naeros. Let us out,” Augustus demanded. There was only silence in reply. Saestra heard Augustus come back down the stairs, but she still jumped when he touched her.

“I’m going to look around,” Augustus said, his voice just above a whisper. “My uncle always told me that a lot of these mausoleums had hidden rooms and were connected by catacombs that led to the city sewers. I bet we can find a way out.”

Saestra nodded, even though they couldn’t see each other in the dark. When he pulled away, however, she reached out and grabbed him, suddenly overcome with fear.

“It’s all right, Saestra. Nothing’s going to happen.”

She let him go and huddled against one of the sarcophagi, hugging her fur-lined wrap to herself. It

didn't keep her from shivering as a chill settled into her bones. Her ears picked up the sounds of Augustus moving along the walls of the chamber. Saestra imagined his hands moving over the surface, looking for some trigger or mechanism that would reveal a secret door. She'd heard the same stories he had, but even if they were true, the chances of finding something in total darkness was close to impossible. More than likely, they would end up spending the night inside this creepy room together.

They were all alone—by themselves. It wasn't such a bad thing, now that she thought about it. She was just about to suggest that Augustus give up his search when he cried out in discovery, accompanied by the grating of stone against stone. Saestra looked in the direction of the sound and could see an area of dark gray interrupting the blackness that surrounded them.

"There's some kind of light down there," Augustus said.

Saestra saw his silhouette separate from the darkness to stand in the center of the gray area. She moved toward him, her arms outstretched in front of her searching for anything that might be in her way.

"Where does it go?" she asked when she reached him.

"Looks like some stairs leading down to another room. Hold on to me," he said as he started forward.

"Be careful. Go slow."

She thought his silhouette nodded. They crept down the stairs, hugging the wall and each other. The gray began to lighten as they descended, and Saestra caught a hint of smoke in the air. When they came to the bottom of the steps, they found themselves at a dead end. There were no doors on the landing.

“There has to be a door here,” Augustus said, his voice thick with frustration.

Saestra glanced around but noticed nothing that looked as if it would grant entrance. Then a faint yellow glow flickered out along the edge where the wall on her right met the floor. It disappeared so quickly she wasn’t sure she actually saw it.

“Over here,” she said. “I just saw some light through a crack.”

Saestra began to push on the wall, looking for a knob or release that would give them access. She could hear Augustus doing the same beside her. This time, it was her turn to find the catch.

The wall slid open to reveal another chamber lit by a solitary torch set in a sconce a few feet away from the stairs on the left wall of the room. Shadows danced across demonic faces carved into the stone, their hungry leers eternally frozen. Saestra gasped.

“What is this place? Waukeen, protect us,” Augustus hissed.

Saestra followed his stare to the middle of the room where another sarcophagus lay, its lid pushed open. Next to the stone box, a figure hunched over something, its back to the pair. A cold wave of fear washed over Saestra, and she trembled uncontrollably, rooted to the spot.

The figure turned, finally aware of the presence of intruders. Torchlight revealed taut skin, so white it was almost translucent, stretched across a ghastly face with red eyes that seemed to burn Saestra’s soul as they fastened upon her. Wild, wiry strands of hair sprouted in random places from its scalp, and blood dripped from its fanged mouth. One clawed hand was wrapped in the hair of its victim, a woman who now hung like a rag doll from the monster’s grip, her life

flowing out of a wound on her neck.

“Saestra,” Augustus shouted at her, trying to break her paralysis.

He took a step, perhaps to put himself between her and the creature, but the thing intercepted him, moving faster than Saestra could blink. One instant it was by the sarcophagus; the next it was at Augustus’s side, the burial robe it wore eerily motionless. It took Augustus’s head in both hands and twisted. Saestra shrieked when she heard bones snap.

“I’m sorry. Did I frighten you?” A raspy voice, like dry leaves rubbing together, issued from between the monster’s bloodstained lips. It focused its beady red pupils on Saestra and smiled. “Where are my manners? I haven’t had dinner guests in such a long time, I’ve forgotten to even introduce myself. My name is Posius.”

Posius drifted over in front of Saestra and gently took her chin in his hand. She tried to recoil at his cold touch, but his grip was inescapable.

“My, my, aren’t you a pretty one. I think I’ll keep you.”

His gaze captured Saestra, and she felt some inner part of her falling into his soulless eyes. She offered no resistance when he tilted her head to the side, and only a slight shudder as he embraced her.