

## Chapter 1: The Cirillian Flame:

A scream that chilled the bones.

The loud shocking pulse of a whip. Somebody begging for mercy, sobs filling the air.

Jenna and Hahn glanced at each other and began running in the direction of the noise. They were close to the marketplace and it sounded like it was coming from there. Another tear soaked scream, another crack tore the air. More people broke into a run, and the sound of heels pounding stone became a rhythm. Green Dniban gowns and brown Reekma capes billowed in the street. Frethenians began to stream towards the disturbance.

But Jenna was faster than everybody. Overtaking other slower runners, she wove and ducked between people, resisting the temptation to take to the rooftops. Flagstones gave way to cobblestones, and cobblestones became small pebbles. Within seconds she had covered the distance, shooting into the square like a bolted horse. She stopped short, bending her knees, spraying up a shower of debris and dust. She did not need to search far. Another sob filled the air.

In the centre of the market was a raised stone platform, and standing on this, ringed by armed, grim-looking church guards, and a growing crowd, stood a segurats. The priest's cowl was down, exposing his bald head with its chequered tattoo. Kneeling at his side, her gown ripped and soaked in blood was a young woman.

Her eyes were black from bruising, and her scalp was bald in patches from where clumps of hair had been ripped. She sobbed uncontrollably, pleading for mercy.

"I a' ... not ... a witch," she begged. Jenna was only just able to make out the words from between the swollen lips slimy with a mixture of blood, spit, and tears.

"Children of the Church!" The segurats called for the crowd's attention. He cracked the whip once more and the masses edged closer. A number of people instantly placed their hands on their hips – a sign of hostility and disapproval. Cluck-birds squawked in their cages.

"This woman has been found guilty of knowledge of the Secrets."

The crowd recoiled, drawing back from the dangerous woman.

"She attempted to bewitch a segurats, and sway him from the Path with promiscuous advances."

The crowd gave several boos. Jenna noticed that the front of the woman's robe just below her belly was also spattered with crimson.

"She is guilty of witchcraft, deceit, and betrayal."

The boos changed to cries of dismay. A number of men called for her death.

"No! Oh Gethras help me!" The drawn plea of the accused, calling on the warrior god, rose above the bloodthirsty jeering. She turned her face to the sky, wailing, beseeching, gnawing futilely at her bonds, falling forwards. Her matted hair coiled around her neck. The whip cracked again, but not in the air. Strings of blood sprang from her back. They arched away from her, high above her head, separated into rubies, flying delicately through the air, splashing darkly on the ground. Her mouth flew open, but it was her eyes that screamed.

"It is forbidden to practice sorcery except as a Sage or Wizard. And *that* only sanctioned by the Emperor *and* the Church. Do you recant your sins, whore?" The segurats surveyed the whip, his face close enough to smell the blood, a satisfied glint in his eye. The crowd called out all manner of insults and curses.

"Yes." Her resignation was deep and long and sorrowful.

A tear fell from Jenna's eye. Surely the Cirillian Flame – that ancient indicator of the balance of good and evil - was a scarlet inferno at this moment?

"Then by mercy of your confession are you hereby deemed an Incast. Your tongue shall be plucked from your mouth lest you curse those who seek to right your heretical ways." The segurats took a step back, motioning to a group of men close by. Four held the woman, one opened her mouth with a large pair of tongs, and another took up a position in front of her. Her eyes darted, wide, stark windows onto sheer terror. She redoubled her pleading. Her voice was hoarse, her body bucked as if in a fit.

The man standing in front of her took out a small pair of pliers and thrust them savagely into the screaming woman's mouth. The implement clacked loudly against blood-flecked teeth, prizing the jaws apart with crunching cruelty. Seizing the tongue, he severed it with a quick movement of his knife. Triumphant he held the flesh aloft.

The woman collapsed, blood gushing from her lips. She was lifted by the four that had held her, slung over the shoulder of one, and carried away. The segurats stood forward again, relieved the man with the pliers of his gruesome trophy and addressed the crowd.

“Let it be once more known, that all who seek to control the Secrets shall meet with a similar punishment.” He flicked his wrist and the bloody tongue flipped through the air. The crowd scattered with cries of alarm. With a squelch, the grisly offering landed at Jenna’s feet, crimson strands of flesh becoming a web that drew instant silence down onto the throng. It lay there, once a means of love and expression, now hardly recognizable, no more than a bloody piece of meat to the wharfdog that would eat it; or to the flies who would have their way with it, as the segurats had had with the woman.

Jenna stared at the ground, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Incast. It was a horrible fate. To be banished, but not chased from the city; cut off from everybody in every way ...

If the woman survived having her tongue removed, her life would be a waking nightmare; she would be a living resident of Dranaga – the underworld – before her soul had left its mortal vehicle, from this day on.

A soft hand slipped into Jenna’s and she was dimly aware of Hahn leading her home.