

“They were Premen,” said the man who’d come to help.

“That’s not possible,” I heard Yolen say, but the fear in his voice contradicted his words.

“Trust me, seer, they were Premen,” the man repeated. And he left us to recover ourselves back to the path.

I was too cold then to care about questions. Too shocked to ask my keeper what “Premen” meant. All I yearned for was the fur that the Horste man offered and that Yolen had wrapped around my quivering shoulders. But as we scaled the riverbank I quickly put away my own misfortune and turned instead to the people of the forest. The old man knocked down by the strange black horse was lying motionless on the ground. A woman was kneeling beside him, weeping. A tall man, rugged and handsome as the hills, looked at the body and touched the woman’s arm. Then he rose up straight and called out loudly, “My father by marriage lies here, murdered. Who will support me in my rightful claim to vengeance?”

All of the Horste men shouted, “I!” Those with spears raised them high above their heads.

But as quickly as their roar had shaken the forest, their voices fell away to an anxious mumble. Out of

the crowd stepped forth a woman, a dark green cape flowing off her shoulders. I felt Yolen's hand tighten slightly on my arm. It was a measure of protection, but I didn't know why until the woman dropped her hood and I saw her face. Her skin was as pale as the shimmering moon, the rims of her eyes so heavy with shade that the weirdly violet points within them looked as far removed from me as stars. Bones and bird feathers hung in her hair. There were more around her neck and ankles and wrists.

"What is she?" I whispered.

"A sibyl," said Yolen. "You must stay away from her."

The handsome man drew a sword from his belt. "Hilde, I beg you, put an enchantment on this humble blade so I might take that villain's head from his shoulders."

The sibyl walked slowly around the body. "Put away your sword," she said.

"But the honor of my family is —"

"You will have no *family*," the sibyl hissed, "if you lunge at this man with bloodlust and steel. He will shred you like a pinecone and hang you from a tree."

"Who is he?" someone shouted.