

# ONE

**T**he sweeping antlers had once crowned the head of a whitetail stag, but Sibyl had found them in basement of the Smithsonian and could not leave them behind. The majestic pair curved outwards to make a dun-yellow corona of twenty-eight points, each tipped with copper so that they sparkled in the lamps' flickering light. The root of each antler had been set into a helmet carved from bone, and the bone had been covered in a layer of thin leather, carefully bleached white to better display the skin's artwork: tattoos of lines and spirals, old languages long forgotten by almost everyone, which Sibyl herself had carefully emblazoned on the donor before they'd been slaughtered and tanned.

The antlers were unimaginably dense. Their weight always came as a surprise when Sibyl Modestus picked up the ornate headdress and settled it upon her crown. She artfully arranged the tassels, leather cords, copper beads and owl feathers so that they covered her thick auburn braids, then she tied the headdress' straps tightly under her chin before draping a cloak of deer fur over her shoulders. She shifted it slightly to evenly distribute the weight across her neck. Then, lastly, she plucked at the edge of the tattooed leather that covered the bone cap until its ragged edge hung down in front of her eyes.

She'd performed this ritual so many times in the last century, she didn't need vision to follow the steps.

In a cavern with soot-stained walls, the twelve Oracles stood in a circle around a cluster of shallow stone lamps. They clasped their hands at their chests, and each one hummed a disjointed note that grew louder and louder until the shrine filled with sound as thick as treacle. When the humming had reached so loud a pitch that Sibyl felt her heart resonating within the cage of her ribs, she flicked out one index finger, and she heard the Oracles drop their indigo robes to the ground in a flutter of fabric and fur. All of them stood, naked as her, with only their faces covered by featureless copper masks.

Sibyl sang out the ancient lyrics in a pure, clear voice. She raised her hands above her head, parting the veil of reality like a gauze curtain, coaxing the energy of the cosmos to trickle through her fingers and wrap around her wrists like invisible serpents. None could manipulate the ether like Sibyl. She felt it in the nuclei of her cells. The notes of her song vibrated through the filaments of her muscles and sparked a quiver in the bowl of her pelvis. Then, like a tickle in her throat, she felt an annoying, ghostly presence in the upper corners of the room: an adjudicator, a vampire who had long ago abandoned its physical body. Sibyl scowled but she refused to let her disgust taint her voice; she dragged her attention back to the song, to the notes, to the tremble of energy in the air. They would watch as they always did, and she reminded herself that she did not care. In fact, she preferred it. Their presence, their wordless judgment, only made the ritual more profound.

When the hymn reached its conclusion, she stepped towards the heat of the oil lamps and held one palm directly over the largest flame. Her dry, undead flesh sizzled and snapped. The circle of pain in her left hand sang its own pure sweet song, and the sensations drowned out all other experiences -- Sibyl leaned into the searing heat, laughed at it, felt the agony spark an ecstatic flutter between her legs. She took a breath to sing back to the pain. Her voice warbled with bliss.

Then she drew back her hand and smoke curled off her palm. The smell of roasted flesh pointed her to the right, and circling her finger around the Oracles, the pain spiked as she reached one, and she curled

her finger at them, beckoning them to step forward and stand beside her.

Their step held no fear or trepidation. The Oracle was willing.

Sibyl held out her arms to welcome them forward. When the chosen Oracle stood before her, she reached out to lay a kiss upon their cold copper mask and felt the smooth cool skin of their torso against her own. Drums began, chanting rose into a fevered howl, and the echo of their primal songs bounced from the curve of the walls. Sibyl lay her injured hand upon their stomach; the message was waiting in here. She felt it like a pulse of electricity through the excited nerves of her scorched palm.

Sibyl Modestus drew back a step. Then she lowered her head, antlers pointing forward, and charged.

The copper-tipped antlers slashed deeply into the unprotected stomach. There was a gasp and a cry from the Oracle, but Sibyl felt the animal's noble spirit flooding through her body, filling her like an empty vessel, and she surged forward again with fists clenched, the heavy headdress pulling her forward. The Oracle had not drunk in three days so there was very little blood, but their undead hands reflexively clutched at their body as if they were still alive, as if they were bleeding out. Sibyl slashed again and again, counting out every impact she made, and when she'd reached 23, the victim finally collapsed and sprawled across the ground. Sibyl stood up again and balanced the antlers on her crown. The drums ceased. The hall fell silent.

Sibyl raised her hands, thanked the universe for the message they were about to receive, and removed the headdress.

The Oracle had lost her copper mask in the violence of the attack. With her blindfold removed and her vision returned, Sibyl recognized the girl at once -- before the Cleanse, they used to call her Amelia. Sibyl crouched down beside her.

"Tell me where to search and I will show you mercy," she said.

During the violence of the goring, the other Oracles had not left their place in the circle -- their dedication to the complex arts of haruspicy pleased Sibyl immensely. The Oracle on the ground waved her fingers, gasping at the impact and the sensation, the loops and lumps of

her guts pouring out from her wounds as she writhed and rolled onto her back.

"Li...liver," she stuttered, then added, "I desire no mercy."

The pride that Sibyl felt was indescribable. She slipped her hands into the slashes, rooted her hands around in the moist intestines until her fingers found the smooth loaf of the liver, and she grasped it, both firmly and gently, and pulled until it slipped out. The Oracle's eyes rolled up in her head. She lowed like a cow giving birth.

By lamplight, the liver was shiny black. Sibyl ran her injured palm across it, and felt the message in the minuscule bumps and furrows.

The Oracle on the ground looked up with haunted eyes. "What... does it... say?"

"You have done well, my daughter," Sibyl said, studying the patterns of blood vessels on the liver's surface. Her voice grew husky with anticipation. "The message is clearly written."

Sibyl stood to address the Oracles. They lowered their drums, shivering.

"Fate is a ravenous beast," she began. "We have severed ourselves from the rhythms of the living world — the world above — and Fate is displeased with our arrogance. It comes to devour us." If the adjudicator was still spying on them from the corners of the cave, Sibyl hoped the damned intruder was trembling in fear, and she suppressed a sly smile. Looking down at Amelia's butchered form, she added, "Our path is chosen, our future is set. Nothing we do now can change what will transpire. All we can do is embrace the change that is coming, and oh, what a change it will be!"

Then Sibyl raised up the liver like a prize, hard fought and hard won. "Within the fortnight, my children, the Empire of Aeterna and the rule of the Glorious Nine will be no more."