

SERPENT'S TEETH

Face pressed against the damp grit of the wall, Tanis fought and cried until she could no longer lift her arms. Then she slumped to the floor, pulled up her knees, and put her head in her hands.

She could still feel the congealed residue of blood on her palms as she pressed them to her face. There was no consolation there. The hot joy she'd felt when she stabbed the black-robed priest in the throat had given way to a hollow wonder that she'd taken a life. And it had made no difference, for here she was. Wherever here might be. She had no idea.

The Spanish soldiers had taken her from her home in silence. The only sounds had been cries and musket shots from the other end of the building where her parents slept, the heavy tread of armed men on wooden floors, and then one last shriek cut off in the middle. Then silence. She'd been put into some kind of wagon and taken a distance away, but how far and where she couldn't hazard a guess. She was kept bound and wrapped in a thick blanket, dulling her senses and preventing any hint of where she might be headed. The only time that the soldiers removed the blanket was when they gave her a few swallows of water and a mouthful of stale bread, and that was only done at night when she couldn't tell where she was. Her best guess was that about a week had passed, but she couldn't be sure.

Her stomach grumbled with hunger, reminding her that she'd shamed herself repeatedly in the wagon. Her captors had not removed the blanket for more than a few minutes at night, not even to let her go to the bathroom, so that when she could hold herself no longer she'd soaked everything around her. This was the only time the silence was broken, as she heard coarse laughter and crude jests about what she'd done.

Taking a deep breath, she mentally reviewed what she did know. This was no simple kidnapping; her family was wealthy, and like so many old, wealthy families in Europe, they had old, powerful enemies; the kind that might have

something more dire than ransom in mind. The fact that she was still alive and hadn't been killed outright was promising. If her parents were alive they might negotiate her release; but the other sounds she'd heard during the raid on her family's home implied that they might not have escaped themselves. If that were the case, then why was she still alive? What did these people want, and who were they?

Tanis leaned her head back against the wall and stared out into the darkness while the vein in her neck pulsed in time with her fear.