



The Soul of Sharah

*All he wanted was to live in peace
with the woman he loved...*

A short story by
Michelle Miles

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THE SOUL OF SHARAH

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For those who believe magic does exist

THE SOUL OF SHARAH

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“My lady, there is a stranger at our door,” Eleanor said, her voice but a whisper.

Sharah turned from watching the downpour and gazed at her servant. The girl was only a scant years younger than she and had been her faithful attendant since the death of her father. She knew her well and was startled to see her tremble.

“Who is it, Eleanor?” she asked. “Is he fearsome? For you have a frightening look upon your face.”

“Oh no, my lady,” the girl breathed. “Fearsome is not the word I would choose.”

“Where is he then?” Sharah demanded.

“In the foyer, my lady, waiting to see the mistress of the manor.”

“Then I shall greet him.”

Sharah picked up her long skirts and hurried out of the library. Walking briskly down the corridor she saw him, his back to her. He was wet from head to toe, his black hair plastered against his skull and his clothes dripping on her marble tile. She scowled.

“Mayhap I can help you, good sir?” she called.

He turned and the faint light of the candles caught his face. She stifled a gasp. Could a man be more beautiful? His eyes were a pale green, twinkling with life in the firelight. He was tall and slender with muscled hands and he greeted her with a stunning smile and a bow of the head.

“Forgive my intrusion, my lady,” he said, his voice a deep baritone. “I’m a traveler in this strange land and seek shelter from the elements this night.”

“I fear I cannot permit you, sir,” she said, almost reluctantly. “My husband is leery of strangers.”

“Perhaps then I could ask him myself?” he suggested.

Her husband, she knew, was passed out cold in a drunken stupor. Something she was pleased to find since she knew she would have an evening to herself. Unfettered of his attentions. She could sleep in peace this night.

“I’m afraid that’s not possible,” she said.

“Then perhaps my horse and I can share a stall in your stables?” he suggested. “That would give me shelter and release you of allowing a stranger in your home.”

She arched a brow in surprise. She would be a fool to allow him to stay in her stables. What harm would there be in letting him sleep in one of the undisturbed chambers of her home? She could simply unlock the room and allow him inside.

“Perhaps, if you agree to leave us before the dawn,” she said.

"Your kindness is most appreciated." He bowed his head before turning for the door.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"To the stables, my lady."

"No," she insisted. "You may stay in our guest chambers."

"I should not wish to cause you harm, my lady, should your husband wake to find a stranger in his home," he said.

Her eyes widened a scant inch, almost imperceptible had he not been looking. But he saw her surprise and the quickening of her pulse in her lovely white neck. *Yes, I can read your mind, my sweet. Tell me your heart's desire and I will fulfill it.* He wanted to say the words aloud, to tell her the words she longed to hear, for she was a lady to cherish and love until the end of his days.

He used his power to feel her emotion, knew she was nervous by his very presence yet there was something else there. A fire burned beneath her skin; it was unrequited passion begging for an answer. By the stars in the heavens, he would answer that passion if he could.

"All will be well," she said and smiled then, her amber eyes glinting. "My husband may be a barbarian, good sir, but I am not of the same mind. Come and I'll show you to your room."

She paused to light a rotund candle and slip a key into her pocket before leading him toward the chamber. He followed her up the staircase, her feet silent on the steps. He could not stop looking at the exquisite length of wavy golden hair hanging down her back. Nor could he ignore the beautiful slender curves beneath her pale pink gown. As they curved up the staircase, he caught her profile.

Breathtaking, he thought. Milky white skin, beautiful translucent amber eyes, long dark lashes, and a heart-shaped face. Her nose was small and pert, her mouth full and luscious and begging for kisses. Kisses only he wanted to give her. Yet she looked rather melancholy and he touched his mind to hers to see what could cause such a beautiful creature unhappiness.

The impact of the vision nearly knocked him off his feet. It certainly rocked him to his very soul. Overwhelming sorrow flooded him. To think...the man she called husband was a wife-beater. How could she have come to be in his keep? His made up his mind that very moment she would be his and he knew their lives would never be the same.

She paused at the door, her hands fumbling with the key in the lock. The candlelight flickered across her face. He reached for her hand then, resting his palm on her fingers. She looked at him, startled.

"Allow me?" he asked.

She shuddered at his touch yet relinquished the key. She watched his beautiful hands work the lock, slipping in the key and turning it until there was a resounding click. Her heart was deafening in her ears as he pushed open the door to the chamber and stepped inside. He turned to her, gazing at her in a way that made her shiver from head to toe.

"Thank you, my lady. Your kindness shall not be forgotten," he said, his voice a husky whisper.

What was he doing to her? She couldn't stop looking at him, mesmerized by his bright green eyes. Her gaze drifted to his lips, slightly parted, and she thought for a brief moment he was going to kiss her. She stepped back suddenly, the flame flickering violently.

"Good night, sir," she muttered. Yet she felt as though she could not walk away. Not yet.

"Good night, my lady," he replied and smiled a slow dazzling smile.

How she wanted to stay with him, she thought. It would be so easy. Just step inside his chamber, close and lock the door. Koltar would never know and perhaps at last she would know passion, what it was like to loved. Her senses throbbed and hummed, pushing her onward.

"You require something else, my lady?" he asked, his eyes inquisitive.

Take me in your arms, she wanted to say. *Love me until the light of day.*

"You have but to ask," he said then.

She blinked. Had she said the words aloud then? By the gods, how she wanted him. He was quite possibly the most beautiful man she had ever laid eyes on. One step and she would be inside the chamber. But perhaps, she thought, she was being foolish. She knew she had an overactive imagination, knew she was probably only dreaming that he was looking at her with desire in his eyes. And was he now stepping toward her?

The stranger reached for her hand curved around the candle and leaned toward her. He blew out his breath gently and extinguished the flame, plunging the corridor in nothing more than silvery moonlight cascading from the windows.

She gasped, her breathing now labored. So she hadn't been imagining things. He really had been stepping toward her. He took her by the elbows and tugged her gently.

"Come, Sharah," he whispered.

It was not a command. It was an invitation. How could she refuse this beautiful man? Could she dare take a chance with her heart? She was so enamored she didn't realize he used her name when she hadn't given it to him yet.

"I shall not hurt you, my sweet. Come. And if at any moment you feel uncomfortable, you may leave me. You have my word. I will swear an oath to you if I must."

"N-no oath," she whispered, her breath catching in her throat.

"I know what he has done to you," he said.

That stopped her. She stared at him in disbelief.

"I felt your pain, my sweet," he said, caressing her bruised soul with his words. "Do not fear me."

She was inside the chamber and wondered briefly how she ended up there when he silently closed the door. She was between him and the door and he stood so close. Close enough for her to smell the scent of him, a masculine musky scent. With the extinguished candle still clutched in her hand, he leaned into her, his mouth at last brushing her lips in a soft kiss.

Just that small taste was enough to set her emotions aflame. Her eyes closed as his body brushed hers. The candle slipped from her hand and landed with a thud on the floor. Her heart throbbed so much she thought it would burst from her chest. She ached like she had never ached before.

"Tell me to stop," he breathed, "if I do not please you."

She could not tell him to stop, nor could she allow him to go on. Her mind was a tumble of agony and desire, a choice between him and nothing. To have one night of her life where she felt as though she mattered to a man who seemed to care for her. Instead of being tortured at the hands of a brute that did not love her...who only married her for her lands.

Her hands went to his chest, her intent to push him away, to escape his grasp. But her muscles went weak and instead rested on the linen of his shirt. She could feel the pulse of his body through the material. Warmth radiated from him, enveloping her frigid fingertips. She exhaled a ragged breath, her eyes on his throat. His skin was bronzed, she saw, though she wasn't quite sure how she could tell that in the darkness. Her gaze followed the line of his neck, the curve of his square jaw, his shadow beard on his chin and cheeks. His eyes were so pale and so...hypnotic. They drew her in to the depths of his soul.

"I will love you like no other," he murmured. "My hands are gentle."

He touched her then, one slender finger tracing the outline of her cheek, her neck. His hands cupped her face as he bent to kiss her once more. This time, his kiss was more demanding, yet still with a hint of gentleness. His lips took hers in a spine-tingling kiss, one that blistered her spirit.

"Do you wish me to stop, my sweet?" he asked, his mouth against hers, his breath warm.

"I..." She faltered, unable to answer. Her body knew what she wanted; her heart ached for his touch yet her mind shouted denial. But she found her voice at last. "I don't even know your name."

It was a silly thing, she thought, her need to know his name. Did a god need a name, she wondered blindly. Did someone as beautiful as he really exist? She feared this was all a dream and she would wake next to her lot of a husband...a man who had no love to give.

"My name is Daunte. Say my name, my sweet. That is all you ever need say this night. Just my name."

Her hands were still on his chest, aching to move, to explore. He seemed to sense her hesitation, her fear. Perhaps that was why he didn't rush her. He took his time with his lazy kisses. His hands stayed on her face, unwilling to move until she acquiesced.

"Yes, I am real."

She gasped audibly and shoved him away then, stepping into the room, into the darkness.

"Who are you that you can read my mind?" she demanded.

"Ah, my dear heart, it does not matter who I am or where I come from. It only matters I am here now, to love you until the light of day. Is that not what you wished?"

"Who...are...you?" she asked again, this time not nearly as demanding. For even she could not deny it was indeed what she wished. "You are not of this land, are you?"

"No," he said. "I come to a land of peace, for all I wish is a home and a family to call my own."

"So you seduce another man's wife?"

"Do you not wish to be seduced?" he asked. "Is it not love and tenderness you seek?" He stepped toward her, his face shadowy in the half-light.

"How do you know my thoughts so clearly?"

"I have attuned myself to you, my sweet." He stopped scant inches in front of her, smiling. "You are a beautiful lady, meant for passion and tenderness. I can give you all you desire."

"And be gone on the morrow, leaving me once again alone." She turned her back to him, staring at the floor.

But his hands were on her shoulders. "Your heart is fragile, as though made of glass. I shan't ever break it, my love. You have my word."

"But my heart is already shattered," she muttered and turned to face him. "Or can you not see that?"

"Aye, I can." He cupped her face in his hands. "I can mend it for you."

"But only for a night," she said.

A tear streaked down her cheek then, rolling over his thumb. It startled him, for in the darkness he could not see the pain in her translucent eyes. He hugged her to him, nearly squeezing the breath from her and stroking her hair.

"Oh, my poor sweet. How did you come to marry such a barbarian of a man who does not cherish you?" he asked, more to himself than to know the true answer. If he knew it, it would surely kill him. "I will never leave you."

"But—"

He shushed her words then with one finger to her lips.

"Let us not speak another word tonight," he said. "We waste precious time with words. There are only a handful of hours left until dawn and I shall love you every minute until then."

Her heart ached at his words. Could she accept them? Could she allow herself to love him, knowing she may never see him again? She wasn't sure she could really trust a passing traveler...a stranger in her land. Where would he go when he left her? Would he woo another unsuspecting woman at his next stop?

"I assure you, my sweet, you will be the only one my heart desires."

"Stop that," she muttered, yet she smiled.

She could get used to him reading her so completely. She stepped back from him, pushed her hair over her shoulder and looked at him in the darkness.

"There are no more words," she whispered. "Only one...Daunte."

Many Moons Later

Sharah stood on the balcony overlooking the rolling hills covered in a blanket of snow. Pale moonlight danced on the snowflakes, sparkling and reflecting up to her. She shivered against her cloak, wrapping it tighter around her small frame and gazed at the twinkling sky.

This was her favorite place, giving her a sense of contentment and safety away from her unhappy marriage.

Thinking of her husband now sent a cold shiver through her. She glanced over her shoulder at the one man who made her life complete. Daunte stood at the far end of his spacious room hunched over a scarred wooden table. He was a head taller than she, with black hair and mysterious dark eyes. Since that fateful stormy night when he arrived on her doorstep, those eyes entranced her. She would give up all that she had to live life with him.

"I have finished!"

She turned to watch as he stood straight, placing the carving tool on the scarred wooden table and glancing her way. His dark eyes met hers, sending her heart into a wild tattoo.

He picked up the golden object, the chain dangling from it through his fingers.

Daunte granted her a smile as he stepped onto the balcony next to her, lifting the object in his hand up for her to see and grinning. Resting in his palm was a flat gold disc with a round amber crystal, intricate knotwork was etched into the gold. The other side was smooth and devoid of markings.

"Daunte, it's beautiful," she breathed.

"It's for you. So even when we are apart, you can be close to me."

She ran her fingertips over the knotwork. "I love it."

"The crystal matches the color of your eyes." Daunte's words formed a crystalline fog in the air. He slipped the medallion around her neck.

"I hope someday I will never have to leave you."

"That day will come soon, my love."

"Koltar—"

"Shh." He placed his index finger over her lips.

She knew he didn't want to hear her speak his name. But there were times it was unavoidable. Times like now when she was faced with returning home. Her blond hair fluttered over her shoulder in the wind, dancing in front of her vision. Daunte brushed away the stray locks, tucking it securely behind her ear. Her throat tightened with the threat of tears.

"I can't bear to think I have to leave you tonight."

Daunte slipped his arms around her, enveloping her in his warmth. She shivered against him, her head fitting snugly under his chin as he stroked her soft hair. "I don't want you to go back to him."

"I know," she whispered, squeezing her eyes shut. "But if I leave him now, he'll hunt me down. He'll stop at nothing to find me and when he does he'll kill not only me, but you and our daughter as well."

"I can protect you from him," he said. "I'm a High Priest, after all. I can weave a magic spell to hide all of us. Stay with me tonight and we'll leave for the mountains at dawn."

"I can't." She pulled away, shaking her head. "I'm only here with you tonight because he's on the king's business. He will soon return." She touched his cheek and smiled. "Be patient, Daunte. I'm planning to leave Koltar in less than a month's time. Then we can go to the mountains and be together as a family, just as you and I both want. For now, I have to go back."

"But Amaris? What of her?"

Sharah looked inside Daunte's room. Inside the cradle near the bed, she could see the small round head of their sleeping daughter.

"She'll be safe with you." She looked at Daunte. "It pains me to think of the anguish you must have knowing her mother is married to a barbarian."

"It does." Daunte embraced her again, holding her close. "But I know our love was meant to be or Amaris would not have been born under the moon. Koltar doesn't suspect?"

"No. He thinks the child was stillborn. May the gods forgive me for lying to him. And may he never find out."

The day Amaris came into the world was her happiest. Only moments after her birth, Sharah sent her away to Daunte with her handmaid and a wet nurse, secreting them away from the castle under the cover of night. She knew her child would be safe until she could join them without fear.

"I must go before my absence is discovered." She slipped out of her lover's embrace.

They stood together on the balcony, gazing at the night sky. Their time together grew shorter and shorter. For the last few weeks, it had become increasingly difficult for her to leave her husband to come to him.

She loved him like no other and bore him a daughter. Amaris was the most beautiful creature she had ever seen with eyes the color of her own and hair as pale as the early sunlight.

In the distance, there was a rumble of thunder. She scanned the horizon but saw nothing but twinkling stars against the night sky. Then something glinted in the moonlight and dark shapes formed, heading toward the castle.

Riders on horseback approached, kicking up snow in their wake and the horse's hooves pounding the earth with a sinister roar. The hair on the back of her neck prickled up and an odd feeling crept over him. The first horseman carried a flag marked with the unmistakable crest of Koltar.

"Daunte—" she began.

"I see him."

Sharah spun around and dashed inside, snatching the sleeping baby into her arms. Daunte was right behind her.

"He mustn't find Amaris. He'll kill her!"

"Come with me," he commanded. "We'll hide her and then I'll see you to safety." He took Amaris from her arms, the baby fussing from the abrupt disturbance.

The two of them dashed down the stone spiral steps as the baby wailed. They ran through the deserted corridors of his castle to the chapel where he kicked open the wooden door to the priest's quarters. The old man sat up with a start, eyes wide.

"What's the meaning of this?" he demanded when he saw the two standing in the doorway.

"Father Khoury," Daunte panted as he came forward. He shoved the screaming infant at him. "I have to ask you to take care of this infant."

"Whatever for?" he asked as he stared down at the red-faced child.

"War comes to our castle door. You must protect this child with your life."

Khoury took the bundle into his shaking hands. "I have no use for a child," he said, still protesting.

"If anything happens to me or the mistress, you must see her to safety." Daunte squeezed the older man's shoulder. "The man who comes now will try to kill her."

Daunte didn't give him another chance to speak. He took Sharah by the hand and dashed through the door. The alarm sounded and the few men who had come with him in his flight from his homeland prepared for a confrontation. As he ran down the corridor, one of his knights hurried toward him.

"Milord, the castle is under siege," he said.

"I know. Bar the main entrance and keep them out as best you can. I'll join you shortly," Daunte replied.

The man gave a quick nod, turning on the toe of his boot and hurrying back the way he had come.

"What are you going to do?" she asked, breathless. "You have no army—"

"I know," he snapped. "But I am a powerful High Priest. I will take care of him."

A shudder ran through her, knowing what he meant but afraid to voice it. In the short year Daunte had been in her life, she knew he despised the man who called himself her husband. Yet she also knew he'd had enough of war and fighting when he fled his homeland. All he wanted was to live in peace and now he was faced once again with fighting. All because of her.

"It's not your fault," he said suddenly, turning his dark gaze on hers. "And never think that again."

She had forgotten he could read her, hear her thoughts so completely. He stopped abruptly in the corridor and grasped her, pulling her close.

"I want to protect you and Amaris. You've suffered enough my love. Now I want you to do as I tell you. I'll see you to the stables and you'll ride north into the mountains."

"No, Daunte." Panic seized her. "Don't make me leave here without you."

"Listen to me," he said, shushing her. "You'll be safer if you do. Come now. We need to hurry."

He took her hand again and together they hurried out of the castle and into the inner bailey, heading toward the stables smelling of hay. Daunte went

to his own horse, a massive gray spotted stallion, and helped her onto its back. She held his hand, and as she looked down at him her eyes were bright with fear.

“Ride north until you find a small cottage at the foot of the mountains. It’s on the other side of the Tonce Pass. Wait for me there. Don’t stop for anything or anyone. I’ll come for you after Koltar is dead.”

“You mean to kill him?” She stared at him, her eyes hard.

“Aye. It’s the only way the three of us will live in peace.”

She leaned down close to him. “Please come to me soon,” she whispered.

“I will. I promise.”

His hand touched her cheek. He kissed her quickly, their lips barely touching. He released her and she rode away into the cold night, the horse snorting. She turned to see him staring back at her as she left him. Her hair and cloak bounced with every clop of hooves.

She was through the gatehouse on the backside of the castle. In the distance behind her she could hear the clash of weapons. The sounds echoed off the mountains looming in front of her and she shivered against the cold.

An explosion rocked the earth beneath the horse’s hooves and caused the beast to rear back, knocking her into the thick snow. The horse whinnied and huffed then galloped away in fear. She stood, brushing her skirts free of the damp, and looked back at the castle. A large fire had erupted on the other side at the main gate entrance.

Seeing the flames lick the night sky sent a terrible shiver through her. She turned back and ran, hindered by the ankle-deep snow. Her feet were numb and her gown and cloak damp. She pressed on and went back inside through the gatehouse, knowing it was foolish to return. Yet she feared the worse when she saw the flames.

The army was inside now and the two men faced off. Daunte stood with his arms in a wide V over his head. His body glowed in a white aura. Koltar charged at him on horseback, his sword drawn over his head. She screamed and ran toward Daunte. Koltar spotted her then and jerked the horse to a stop. He lowered his sword and stared at her. She had halted her run a few feet behind the man he meant to destroy.

“Bring her to me,” he shouted to his men, pointing at her with the tip of his blade.

Daunte whirled around to see Sharah, his dark eyes wide. His face paled at the sight of her. “Sharah—”

“Silence!” Koltar boomed.

Three men from Koltar’s army materialized out of the shadowy darkness and seized her, dragging her to her husband. She struggled against them, but she knew it was no use.

Daunte watched in horror as they dragged her to him, knowing what Koltar would do to her once he had his filthy hands on her. He balled his fists, angry flaring throughout his entire body. He could stand it no more.

He aimed his power on the three men, intending to make them release her. But it was of no use. He had turned his back on his enemy and was tackled and knocked to the ground. Angry booted feet and metal gauntlets kicked and punched him in the face and ribcage. Rough hands dragged him to his feet.

“She’s mine!” Koltar shouted.

He dismounted and strode to her, sliding the sword back into its scabbard. He was big and tall with flaxen hair and shark-like eyes as cold as the sea. Every muscle vibrated and pulsed through his leather armor. Sweat rolled down his cheek. His knee-high boots shined darkly in the firelight of the torches surrounding the bailey. The yellow firelight, throwing shadows on his pale skin, illuminated the anger etched on his face.

Her face paled of all color and Daunte saw her shiver. Attuning to her, he could hear her fear.

In a swift motion, Koltar hit her across the cheekbone. The brass on the knuckles of his leather gauntlets tore the skin and knocked her down. She yelped and crumpled to the frozen ground.

Daunte struggled against the men holding him, trying to free his arms. She raised her head, her shaking fingertips feeling the split skin and blood oozing out of the wound. She stifled her whimper, but couldn’t stop the tears that flowed down her cheek.

“Koltar...please...” she begged.

“Please?” he scoffed. “I’ll show you no mercy after you’ve tarnished my good name with that man.” He pointed at Daunte. “You’re nothing but a whore and I plan to kill you for it. Then I’ll do away with your illegitimate child.”

“No!” She grasped the edge of his cloak and reaching for his hand. “Do what you want with me, but Koltar, please don’t—”

He jerked his hand away and backhanded her once more. He managed to hit her again on her open wound. Blood streaked down her cheek. “Don’t beg me to spare a bastard’s life.” His cold eyes glinted with warning.

“Leave her alone!” Daunte cried. “It’s me you want to hurt. Let her be.”

Koltar glared at him. He walked over slowly, looking Daunte up and down. “One more word out of you and I’ll have your arms removed. Then we’ll see how you perform those magic tricks of yours.”

Daunte clenched his jaw, the muscles flexing in anger. Koltar whirled on his heel, his cloak billowing behind him and walked back to face the woman. His henchmen dragged her up to her feet. She struggled against them as they gripped her arms with cold hard fingers.

“Don’t struggle, darling,” Koltar said, sarcasm lacing his words. “You’ll only make things worse.”

Her eyes widened and she froze as he pulled a shiny-bladed dagger with a jewel encrusted handle from his belt.

“Recognize this?” He held it close to her face so there would be no mistake. “A wedding gift to you, as I recall. From me on our wedding night not two years ago.”

Koltar plunged the dagger into her stomach. Sharah gasped; her eyes widened. He yanked the dagger out, now covered in her blood, intending to stab her once again.

"You bastard!" Daunted shouted.

Koltar paused and glanced his way. But Daunte saw nothing but blinding red rage. Clenching his fists, he closed himself off to his surroundings. He called upon his powers from deep within. The High Priest jerked his arms as close together as he could and then pushed them apart, tossing off his restrainers and stepping away from them with ease. The white aura returned and he threw out his arm, sending a white lightening bolt in Koltar's direction. It hit his hand holding the dagger, causing him to drop it to the ground and shout an obscenity. He gripped his blackened wrist, the fingers of his hand curling into a gnarled mass.

With his good hand, he unsheathed his sword from its scabbard. Sharah stood motionless watching the commotion and sagging against her captors. The sword, as though in slow motion, swung through the air in a wide arc toward her. Her back stiffened before the impact, slicing her across the chest.

"Sharah!"

Daunte ran for her as the men released her and she crumpled to the ground. He scooped her into his arms. His eyes reflected a deep, unspeakable pain. Her amber-colored eyes glazed and glittered with tears. She reached for him, her cold fingertips dragged across his cheek.

She gasped once, staring up at him with sightless eyes. Then her body went limp, her pulse stopped and her breathing ceased. Daunte lowered her to the ground and removed the amulet. He stood, slipping it around his own neck. His hand went into a fist at his side. He faced Koltar, standing scant inches from the murderer. His green eyes were full of hate and rage. Koltar smirked at his dead wife's lover.

"Now half my problem is solved. Where is the child?"

"You'll never find her," Daunte seethed. "I'll make sure of it."

Daunte stared hard at the man, concentrating on his face. Again he called upon all of his magic at once, an act rarely done by any High Priest. He closed his eyes, still seeing the face of Sharah's killer in his mind's eye. He lifted his arms in a wide V over his head then brought his palms together in a loud clap. When his palms came together, the sound of thunder and a white explosion erupted from him. A shooting white light hit Koltar square in the chest, knocking him backwards a step and then off his feet.

Koltar hit the frozen ground with a hard thud, the sword falling from his hand. He stumbled back to his feet, scrambling to get it. Daunte separated his palms, making another wide V and clapped them together again. Koltar lunged for him as Daunte opened his eyes in time to see him. He stepped aside as the warrior sprawled once again on the ground.

"Do something!" Koltar shouted to his men.

The effort was in vain. Daunte swept arms across the men bearing down on him, knocking them all back and off their feet. They fell unconscious to the

ground. The remaining men turned and fled. Koltar fixed him with a stare, his blue eyes dark and menacing.

"You can't defeat me, Koltar," Daunte said. "I'm a powerful High Priest from a land you cannot begin to imagine." He took a step toward Koltar. "And I intend to avenge the death of Sharah."

Daunte pointed a hand at the man, all five fingers spread and his palm facing the earth. He cast a restraining spell on him. Koltar was frozen where he was and alert to all that was about to happen to him.

Daunte took another advancing step and stared down at him. He raised his arms up once again in a wide V. His hands came together in a loud clap, emitting the powerful white light again hitting Koltar in the chest.

The white light encased the warrior and he clutched his chest, his face contorting in pain. He screamed from the depths of his soul, echoing through the land and over the hilltops, disrupting sleeping birds and animals and causing an avalanche in the mountaintops that stood behind Daunte's castle.

Then the air filled with an eerie silence. The men knew the war was over. Koltar was dead, his body frozen and his face etched in fear. Daunte lowered his arms and stared at the dead man for a brief moment, then stepped around him and went to his beloved Sharah. He lifted her lifeless body from the ground and carried her to his chambers.

He laid her gently on the bed, smoothing back her hair from her ashen face. He knelt at her side and held one cold hand, sobbing until he couldn't anymore. His body ached from the pain of her death. He stood, leaned over her and kissed her forehead one last time. He removed the amulet from his neck and laid it upon her blood-soaked breast with gentle care.

"You will not have died in vain," he whispered.

He swept his hands over her cold body, feeling every curve that was once his. He put one hand over the amulet, wrapping his fingers around it and squeezed it until the amber crystal bored into his palm.

"From this day forward, this will be known as the *seun rhusag*," he said. "It will be a source of power, of protection. It will pass from mother to daughter and will belong to one and only one. I shall name her the High Priestess and she shall be the lifeblood that binds the people together, good and evil."

He swept his other hand above her as a blue mist rose from Sharah. Daunte released the amulet and held his arms up and over his head, forcing the blue mist to follow his path.

"It will bear the soul of my beloved so she may live on forever. It will hold her spirit fast and true."

His hands came down, stopping to hover over the amulet. Sharah's body arched up, her eyes flew open and a gasp came from her blue lips. Her lungs exhaled a white fog. The mist and fog mingled and swirled about as if dancing with each other. The amber crystal glowed, matching her eyes. It beckoned the soul of Sharah and pulled it into the stone. Daunte lowered his hands, resting one on her forehead. Her skin was clammy and cold. He lifted the pendant.

"You are gone in body, my love," he said hoarsely, "but not in spirit."

He turned away from his chambers for the last time and went down the steps. His booted feet thudded with a resounding echo on each stone step, as if sealing his past behind him. He headed to the chambers of Father Khoury.

All was silent behind the oaken door. He pushed it open and stood in the doorway, the dim light reflected on his face. He found the priest holding the now sleeping babe to his chest, cooing and rocking her. He looked up at Daunte's blood-soaked clothes and red-stained face and hands.

"The war is over?" he asked.

"Aye. My lady is dead." He held out his arms and Father Khoury laid Amaris into them. "But I have my daughter. And I will teach her everything I know. She will become the first High Priestess."

"High Priestess?" Khoury asked.

"Aye." Daunte nodded. "Please see to it my lady is buried. I must take my leave of this place." He turned on his heel.

"Where will you go?"

Daunte paused and spoke over his shoulder. "To the west...back home to Leath Moghda to raise my daughter, gods willing, in peace."

With those words, he left the castle forever.

THE END

Meet The Author

Michelle Miles writes in several genres but finds she enjoys creating other worlds best of all. With a hectic full time job and a son, she finds time to write in the wee hours of the night. She began her writing career in serialized fiction before breaking into e-publishing with her first contemporary novella, TALK DIRTY TO ME. She is a PRO member of Romance Writers of America, as well as a board member of her local chapter, Yellow Rose Romance Writers, and is a native Texan residing in suburban Fort Worth.

You can visit her website at www.michellemiles.net and her blog, Ye Olde Inkwell, at www.michellemiles.net/blog and for all the latest info and to sign up for her monthly newsletter, The Monthly Grind. When she's not writing, Michelle is an avid hockey fan.

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