

IN THE COMPANY OF THE DEAD

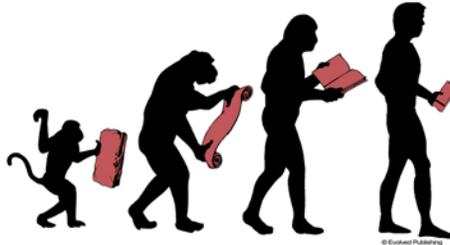
CIARA BALLINTYNE



By
Ciara Ballintyne

SPECIAL 5-CHAPTER SNEAK PREVIEW ONLY

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**IN THE COMPANY OF THE DEAD**

**Book 1 of The Sundered Oath**

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### **The Seven Circles of Hell**

*Confronting the Demon*

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The Sundered Oath

In the Company of the Dead

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What Others Are Saying about Ciara Ballintyne's Books:

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"...a fitting successor to Ballintyne's brilliant debut novel.... It's most highly recommended." - *Readers' Favorite*



Dedication

For Mum, who never read fantasy books – ever, at all – but has read every one of mine.

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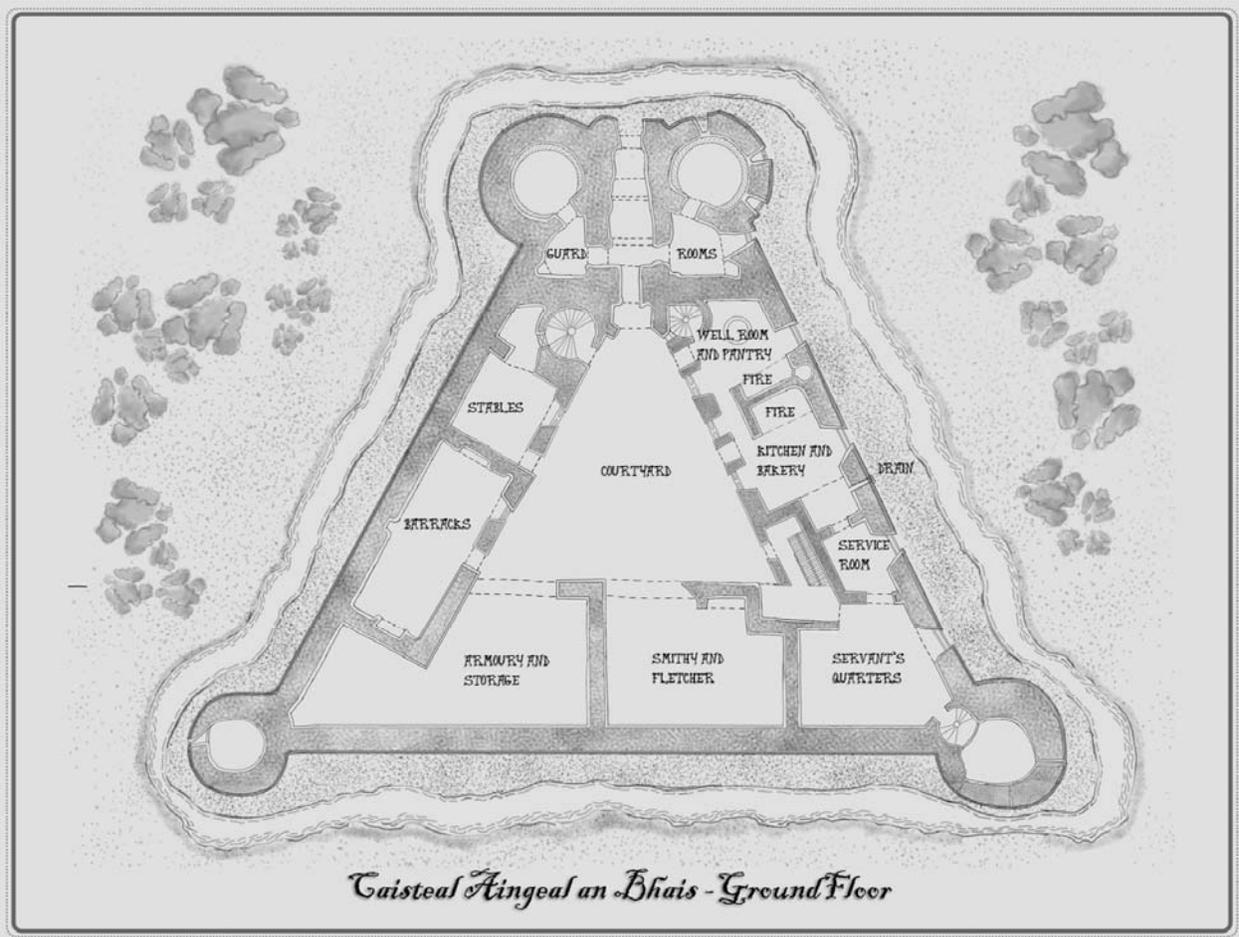
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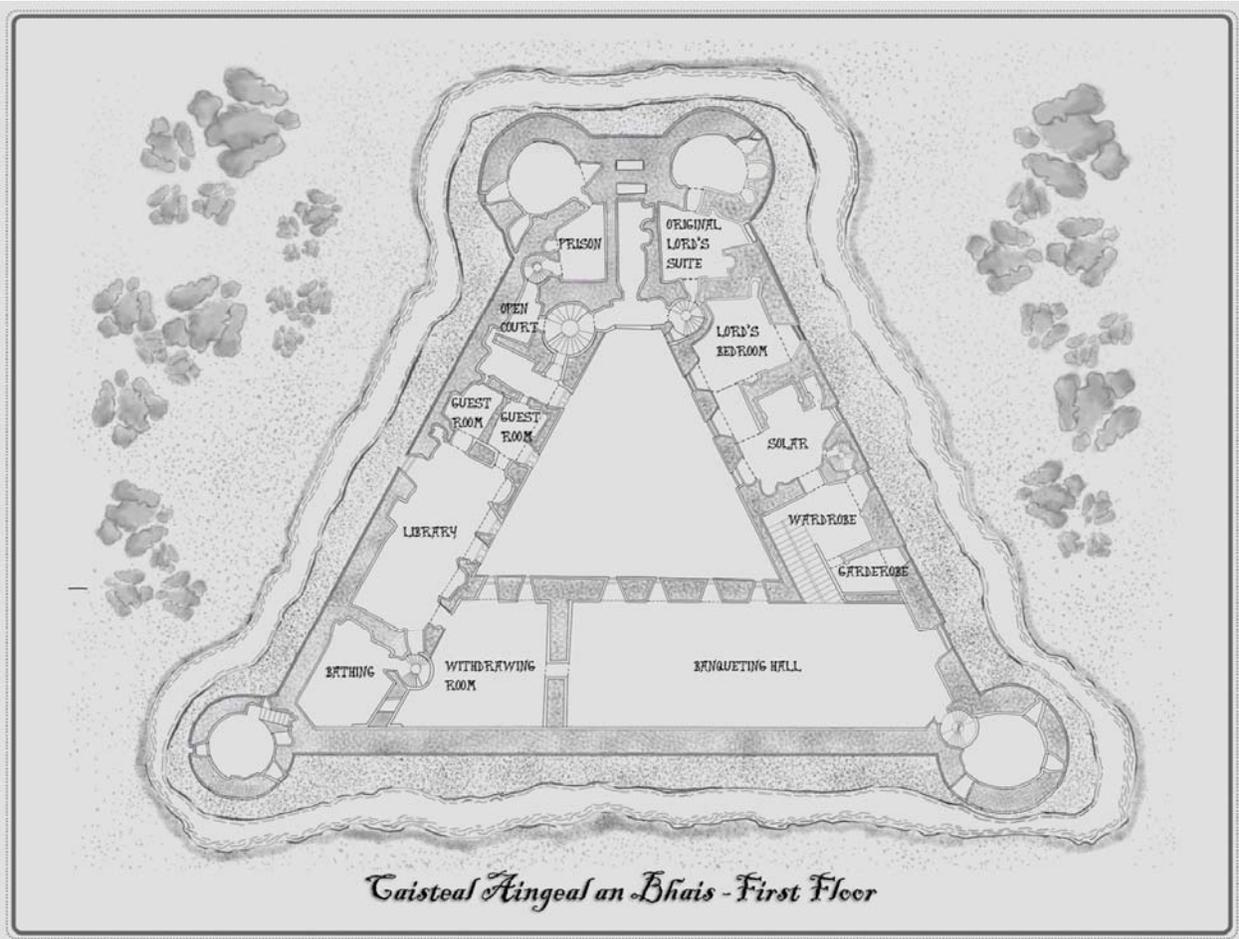
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Caisteal Aingeal an Bhais - Ground Floor



Caisteal Aingeal an Bhais - First Floor



chapter 1

Premonition

Only a fool would split hairs with a god, least of all the goddess of death, but Ellaeva would count herself such a fool and consider it worth it—if she could get away with it.

She leaned across the knife-scarred timber of the tavern table.

“Are you sure?” she asked, her tone even and barely loud enough to be audible over the noise of the flute and the zither. Her work on behalf of the goddess Ahura, adjudicating the small war here in Dayhl, could only be abandoned in favour of a greater threat. If she was going to chase off after the man who killed her parents, she needed to be sure her arguments stacked up. The pursuit of personal justice wouldn’t be enough.

Is it justice or revenge?

No time to worry about that now. She tugged her black hood farther down over her infamous face, even though deep shadows blanketed the common room corner. She’d chosen a table far from the tallow candles mounted in their stag-horn chandeliers. There was no point taking chances; the black hair and porcelain skin of a Tembran would be remarked here among the platinum-haired Dayhlish. Besides, someone might recognise her.

“In Ahlleyn, sure as the spring comes after winter, Holiness.” The narrow-faced man across from her grinned, baring teeth more brown than yellow. The acrid smoke from the candles didn’t cover his pungent breath.

She half-stood, making an urgent, negating gesture as she glanced around, but the hubbub of chatter from the patrons and the music covered his slip. No one even glanced their way. On the far side of the room, away from the two blazing hearths, tables were pushed aside for dancing. She dropped back into her seat, her black robes fluttering around her booted feet.

Ahlleyn lay on the other side of the continent, months of travel by horse. If her informant was right and a Rahmyrrim priest had been dispatched there, he would likely be gone long before she arrived—unless she begged a favour, but she’d not do that for a lark of her own. However, if it meant catching the man who killed her parents, well then maybe she could come up with an argument that would hold water for a god. Old grief and anger, stale from a decade or more, stirred in her gut, and her fingers curled around the edge of the table.

Releasing her grip, she reached to the inner pocket in her robes where rested the smudged charcoal drawing of a man. Hard work and luck had helped her obtain that picture of the man she believed killed her parents—a man she *knew* to be a priest of Rahmyr. If she decided to act against her standing orders, then she needed to be sure it was the man she was after, and that he was involved in some act heinous enough to attract her goddess's attention.

"Did you get the name of this priest? Or his description?" An unknown number of priests served Rahmyr, but she knew six by sight—six still alive anyway.

The thin man shook his head. "Nobody mentioned. I got the impression he's already there, or on his way leastways."

She scowled. No way to be sure then that this was the man she wanted. Begging favours of Ahura for her personal satisfaction was a risky business, especially if she neglected her duties, and perhaps it would all be for nothing.

With one hand, she flattened the map that curled on the table between them. The patrons behind them exploded with laughter at something unheard. Ignoring the noise, she stabbed her finger at an unmarked portion of the map in the foothills of the Ahlleyn mountains. If he didn't know *who*, maybe he knew the *what*. "There, you say? What possible interest could Rahmyr have there? There's nothing of interest at all."

She lowered her voice even further as she uttered the name of the goddess of decay, and glanced around again. That name spoken too loudly would bring unwanted attention. But nearly all the tavern patrons were busy whirling on the impromptu dance floor or lined up to watch the dancers, their backs to her.

The nameless man leaned forward, treating her to another stomach-clenching blast of foul breath, and touched a spot perhaps half an inch away from her finger. A tiny, unlabelled picture marked something there.

"Here, Holiness."

She squinted at the picture, letting his lapse slide. The image represented a holy place. There was an old shrine to Ahura somewhere in the Ahlleyn Borders, wasn't there? And a castle built over it. "Caisteal Aingeal an Bhais."

"That sounds like the name," he agreed. "Never could get my mouth around them Ahlleyn words. Pink castle, I heard."

She grunted. That was the one. "There's *still* nothing there."

Nothing of interest to Rahmyr anyway. The shrine wasn't particularly important, and the castle held no political significance.

"What's there," the man said, "is Lyrām Aharris."

The premonition went through her like a blast of icy wind, stiffening her in her chair as the hand of the goddess brushed against her mind. A light caress, but from a giant, and so it sent her mind reeling. She clutched the table for support. Lyrām Aharris's reputation preceded him the length of the continent: eight years ago, at the age of twenty-seven, he'd brought an end to the centuries-long conflict between Ahlleyn and Velena through a series of brilliant military manoeuvres. He'd survived the Siege of Invergahr against near-impossible odds, brought the crown prince safely clear of the conflict, and fought the Velene to a standstill using their own guerrilla warfare tactics against them. As a novice, she'd covered the tactics thoroughly as part of her studies. The man was a military genius. That he was third in line for the throne of Ahlleyn was the least there was to know about him—at least it was, until his king dismissed him from court. The rumours on everyone's lips said he murdered his wife, even if no one could prove it.

What did Rahmyr want with him?

The answer didn't really matter. Any plot that interfered with a man who stood so close in the succession of a throne and who possessed such military genius was more important than the minor civil war in the north. The valkyr could deal with that adequately in her absence, with a priestess to serve as arbiter of justice. No one but Ahura's Battle Priestess could handle a Rahmyrrim priest targeting a highly ranked noble.

And maybe, just maybe, the one sent to deal with a man as important as Lyram Aharris was also her quarry.

"Your information, as always, is good." She pushed a gold Dayhlish dariz, the highest denomination of coin, across the table to the man.

He waited until she released the coin before snatching it up. Even a man brave enough to spy on the servants of the black goddess of decay hesitated to touch her, such was her reputation. After all these years, the over-cautiousness stung only a little.

Ellaeva climbed to her feet, drawing her black robes around her, as the informant vanished into the crowd as quick as his feet would carry him. She followed more slowly, winding her way around drinkers who instinctively avoided bumping into her even though they were ignorant of her identity. Most would take her for an ordinary priestess of Ahura, a common enough sight in any town or city where they served as magistrates and judges. One pair of dancers almost waltzed into her, the man jerking aside at the last moment and nearly knocking his partner off her feet. He stared as Ellaeva passed, while his partner scolded him loudly.

She needed to find somewhere less crowded than this tavern. If the goddess had deigned to give her a premonition, surely she would consent to speed her journey – and for that, Ellaeva required peace and silence enough to prepare the holy sword for mystic transit.

When she finally spilled out into the silence of the night-shrouded street, the noise of laughter from behind only heightened the empty ache of loneliness in her soul.



Chapter 2

Embracing the Goddess

Dust rose into the sky, painting the sunrise red with a shepherd's warning.

On the castle parapet, Lyrām lowered the eyeglass and frowned. Beyond the ruined, outer wall of the keep, the terrain turned to densely wooded hills and then into mountains, but that much dust meant men and horses, and lots of them. No merchant caravans came past the remote Caisteal Aingeal, and he expected no supply train until the spring thaw reached the mountain passes, which would be two weeks or more. He turned to his aide-de-camp.

"Have any of the scouts returned yet?" The stiff wind whipped the words from his mouth and his auburn hair into his eyes.

Everard stood straight and stiff alongside him, impeccable in formal court jacket and kilt marked with the insignia of his rank. Before he could answer, a shout rose from further down the castle wall. A soldier pointed at the old gate.

Lyrām pressed the glass back to his eye and swung to look, his basket-hilted broadsword banging against his leg at the sudden motion. With no trouble over the winter, and no reason to expect any, he wore only his gambeson and a leather tabard. The rest of his armour remained in his room—a lack that left him distinctly uneasy now.

A horse raced through the crumbling gate in the old vine- and grass-covered outer wall, the rider clinging to its neck. It galloped up the narrow dirt path that cut straight from outer gate to moat. This close to the tail end of winter, no cattle grazed in the waist-high grass between the two walls.

A hushed stillness spread along the soldiers lining the battlements. Tension squeezed a tight knot into Lyrām's gut. Nearly twelve months he'd waited here in exile, twelve months wondering if Drault would be true to his word—if he dared.

Now it began.

"Open the gates." Lyrām spun towards the gate-tower stairwell and hastened down the spiral steps to the triangular courtyard.

As he stepped from the darkness of the stairwell, the sound of hoof beats on timber echoed off the walls. After a long moment, the horse burst from the shadows of the barbican and

clattered onto the cobbles of the inner courtyard, sweat-darkened chestnut flanks heaving and its rider half-hanging from the saddle. Lyrām rushed forward, caught the falling man, and lowered him to the ground.

Everard appeared at his side, his glasses pushed hard to the bridge of his nose and lips pursed. A ring of faces pressed around them, the soldiers' brows creased beneath their helms.

Galdron shoved through, helm in hand and the sun gleaming on his balding pate, and the soldiers fell back to allow their captain passage. He squatted alongside Lyrām with a cursory "sir".

Lyrām eased the man from his grasp and onto his back on the cobbles. He sucked in a breath. *Maddok*. Though the young man was a farmer's son, and Lyrām was a duke's, they'd known each other since boyhood and even played together a time or two. Blood slicked the partial cuir bouilli chest and shoulder harness he wore over his chainmail, its metallic stink filling Lyrām's nostrils. A crossbow quarrel had punched through the mail where the boiled leather plate ended and stood upright in Maddok's chest, buried almost to the fletching.

Lyrām met Galdron's eyes, and the grizzled captain shook his head slightly. No rib had stopped that arrow from going in, only coming out. No doubt the arrowhead pierced the lung. Lyrām closed his eyes momentarily and took a steadying breath. There was nothing to do except ease the lad's passing to Ahura.

Everard handed a waterskin to Galdron, who lifted it to the scout's lips.

Maddok sucked greedily, and water leaked down his chin. Sweat plastered thin blond hair to his skull.

"Sir?" The scout's eyes fluttered open, seeking and holding Lyrām's gaze. "Sir." Relief stained the words this time. "An army, commander. An army comes."

"What? Here?" Lyrām scooted closer, taking Maddok's hand. "Stupid question. Of course here. There's nothing else for miles except trees and the odd cow."

His worst fear, an unspoken and foolish fear, was that an army raised that dust cloud. And yet why should there be an army here? Though technically part of the Borders, Caisteal Aingeal was some thirty leagues from the official boundary between kingdoms, and miles more to the nearest of the fortified keeps. This remote castle, built around a small shrine of Ahura, the goddess of death, truth and justice, contained nothing of value or interest.

Nothing except me.

Prince Drault would not use an army though, would he? Not inside his own father's kingdom? He could never hope to get away with such audacity.

Lyrām shook himself, as though to rid himself of surprise. "Report, please, Maddok."

He surveyed the castle as he listened to the report, his eyes cataloguing fortifications. The knot tightened in his stomach with each passing word. Maddok paused intermittently to gasp through the pain. He was dying, and most likely more would die in days to come, men Lyrām had known all his life. But Maddok was young, so very young, and though Lyrām had lost men before, he hated it each and every time.

"Two thousand men?" Despite his best efforts, disbelief tinged Lyrām's words as Maddok's report rolled to a close. A tiny castle, Caisteal Aingeal's full strength was a barracks of a mere hundred soldiers. Currently, his own guard bolstered the permanent contingent to twice that. After the king dismissed him, they'd been loyal enough to follow him into exile, far from home and court, but had their loyalty brought them only to certain death? It seemed so, in the face of such overwhelming odds.

Drault is behind this. He insisted I be exiled, and he's behind this, too – somehow.

He shunted the memory aside and pulled a half-empty whisky flask from his belt, but

before he took a draught, Everard plucked it from his grasp.

"Not where the men can see." His aide stuffed the bottle in his sporran.

"Near enough two thousand." Maddok coughed, and bright, red blood flecked his lips. "Near as I could count. Sir... they fly the gyrfalcon of Velen."

A murmur ran through the watching soldiers, and Galdron actually spit on the cobbles. "Velenese bastards," the captain muttered through his ginger beard.

The interminable border wars between Ahlley and Velen had only recently come to a close, and some of these men had been with Lyrarn at the Siege of Invergahr, which started the uneasy peace. A great many more had died there.

"An invasion?" If he could snatch the words back, he would. Persuading Everard and Galdron this was directed at Lyrarn personally would be hard enough without offering up the convenient explanation of a Velenese invasion. Draught must be behind this army, somehow, somehow, even though it made no sense. But an invasion made no sense either – there were more lucrative targets closer to the border than Caisteal Aingeal.

Maddok's breathing grew more laboured, and fresh blood stained his lips.

Lyrarn clenched his jaw so hard his teeth hurt. *Not the first, and not the last. Hold it together, man.*

"Right flags," the scout murmured, so softly that Lyrarn had to lean closer, his ear to Maddok's lips. "But they looked to me like... like Gallowglaighs." He drew in a deep, rattling breath.

"Anyone could have hired the Gallowglaighs," Everard said behind him.

"Gallowglaighs are led by Sayella," Galdron replied. "She could be doing it for patriotism or it could be her daddy paying her men's wages. That brings it back to Velen."

"The earl never acknowledged her," Everard said. "And she hates him for it."

Galdron grunted. "You have a point. I heard she wouldn't piss on him if he was on fire."

"I heard she *told* him so. Loudly."

Lyrarn waved their half-bantering debate to silence, waiting, but Maddok didn't speak again. When he drew back, the scout's eyes were fixed and staring.

He snatched the waterskin from Everard and flung it across the courtyard, scattering the soldiers, and then dropped his face into his hands. No tears pricked his eyes – after all those he'd shed for Zaheva, it sometimes seemed he had no tears left to cry. A waste, a god-damned waste: Zaheva, and Maddok, and every other life lost in the Border Wars. And how many more to come? Ahura would drink her fill here long before the crows came. Worried faces peered at him over shoulders as men scurried for their posts.

Across the courtyard, two women shrouded in loose black robes emerged from the well room, which also housed the stairwell to the catacombs, and crossed the cobbles. They knelt beside the body and, in unison, made the sign of the goddess, touching their brow, lips and breasts, to signify the mind, the breath and the heart of the departed, all of which eased in death. Heads bent, they began the ritual prayers of passing.

One of them, her face lost in the shadows of her deep cowl, glanced at Lyrarn, and he shivered as the chill gaze of death brushed against him.

She touched her hand to brow, lips and heart again.

"An ill omen," Everard murmured, staring at the priestesses of death. Stork tall and scrupulously neat, he stood out in his formal kilt and plaid. "For the start of a siege, a worse one is hardly possible, unless we find a company of Ahura's valkyr or the Battle Priestess herself arrayed with the enemy."

"Don't joke." Lyrarn rounded on him, his voice rough. "Don't ever joke about that."

When the warriors of Ahura picked sides, the choice endorsed one and condemned the other.

"I wasn't trying to be funny."

"If the Velenese have broken the treaty," Galdron said, in an obvious attempt to redirect the conversation, "we're not prepared, especially not if they strike here first. We're not equipped to stave off a full assault, but once they neutralise us it's a clear path to the inner kingdom."

"Why would Velenese invade right now, in the middle of the marriage negotiations?" Lyrarn stared off into the distance. He only half-listened for the answer to his question, already absorbed in siege preparations. Ten to one odds, and there was so much to do. He needed to check the food stores, the water casks, the inner well, the armoury, the oil supplies... too many things to list. He'd have no chance to recall the cattle herds wintering in the highlands. His eyes lit on the chickens scratching outside the kitchen, near the small garden. They had eggs, and fresh meat, though not much of either. There was more salted and dried meat in the stores.

A small bevy of children kicked a ball near the kitchen door. Did he have time to get them out? What about the women? A castle under siege was no place for them, and the fewer mouths to feed the better, but where would they go? So many problems.

Galdron and Everard exchanged glances, the latter chewing his lip. Though both were lifelong bachelors, their resemblance ended there. Galdron was bluff-faced, red-bearded and balding, and wore lamellar armour over mail, while Everard never had a single greying hair out of place and wore his formal court dress like a uniform. As always, the braid marking his rank as Lyrarn's aide-de-camp was pinned to his shoulder. Galdron shrugged.

Lyrarn nodded with satisfaction. "Exactly. This isn't an invasion. This is political."

"Half a day doesn't give us much time to prepare." Galdron spoke in a faultlessly deferent and almost too reasonable tone, adopting the attitude of a man talking to a mad king likely to order his head chopped off. He restlessly passed his helm from one hand to the other. "All we can hope is to hold out here long enough for reinforcements. Not in time for most of us, maybe, but we can buy time for the king to muster a defence. You'll need to send word to the king, warn him of the invasion."

"It's not an invasion!" Lyrarn's shout rang off the walls of the triangular courtyard, echoing slightly before fading away.

A stir ran along the walls as the men and women manning the battlements glanced towards them and away.

Everard's lips thinned and his expression grew more pinched, but Galdron met Lyrarn's gaze.

"My lord." He said the words firmly, emphasising the title Lyrarn detested. "Whether this is an invasion or not is moot. You must send word to the king. I will find volunteers willing to risk the ride. You should compose a message." He began to turn away, then stopped. "And shave."

Seething, Lyrarn spun on his heel. Why hadn't he said something to Galdron? He should have reprimanded him, not allowed him to... what? Scold him? Dragon balls, but Everard was right to take away his whisky. No matter how he fell apart on the inside, he needed to hold himself together before his soldiers, now more than ever. And he couldn't dress Galdron down without drawing attention to his sorry state.

He pressed his fingers to his temples as he crossed the courtyard. How much sleep did he get last night? Midnight had come and gone before the whisky dulled the pain and oblivion took him.

Not enough, that's for sure. Not enough to plan a war.

He entered the well room and turned left, climbing the winding stairs to the first floor and his suite. The brands that lined the walls were not yet lit, leaving the stairwell in dim shadows and hiding the shimmer of the pink limestone walls. The air here was cool, dank with moisture after the recent melting of the snow. His boot steps rang echoes off the distant stones.

With the castellan and his family occupying the more lavish suites in the east wall, Lyrarn had claimed the old lord's rooms overlooking the gate. Displacing the resident family just because he'd fallen into disfavour at court would have been poor form. He passed the carved door to the family's residence, took the two steps up to his own quarters, and shouldered through the heavy oaken door into his untidy sitting room.

He didn't allow the servants in here. Everard tidied as much as he could, and that was all. In the near corner, his mail shirt and his moulded cuir bouilli plate armour rested on a stand. Stacks of papers swallowed the surface of a huge blackwood desk positioned to his right beneath the narrow arrowslit looking out towards the ruined outer wall. Straight ahead, through a wide, irregular archway, the covers trailed off the edge of a massive four-poster bed. He spent his nights sleeping inside the curved walls of the gate tower itself.

He crossed the room, boot heels echoing on the floorboards, to the washstand just inside the archway. His razor blade sat next to a silvered glass and pitcher of water. He dipped a finger into the water and shivered at the icy chill. Winter was barely past, and snow probably still persisted in the mountains, with every chance yet of a spring blizzard. The fire had burned low on the hearth and needed stoking to warm the room.

How many days since he'd last shaved? He didn't recall. He picked up his razor and the mirror and examined his jaw. His chin and cheeks were covered in coarse reddish-blond stubble and his hair hung raggedly about his face, as if he'd hacked it off with a knife. *When did I do that?* No recollection even stirred. Must have been drunk out of his mind.

His bloodshot blue eyes stared back at him, mocking. He dropped the razor, letting it clatter into the washbasin, placed the mirror down with more care, and turned back towards the sitting room.

But above the desk, as mocking as his reflection, hung the portrait of his younger self, clean-shaven and square-jawed, with dark-red hair pulled back in a proper queue, staring imperiously with clear blue eyes out of the canvas. His shoulders were set and his plaid flung back to reveal the dragon-hilted clan sword still on his hip. That, at least, remained the same.

The solitary portrait was years old now. A more recent painting hung in the capital. That one included Zaheva.

He dropped into the chair at the desk and buried his face in his hands, as if hiding from the memories, or the portrait. Without raising his head, he groped for the desk drawer, opened it, and found the whisky bottle. As he lifted it to his lips, the fumes burning in his nostrils, the door opened.

Everard paused with one hand on the door handle. His expression didn't change, but disappointment and reproof sharpened his gaze.

Lyrarn placed the bottle back on the desk with a muffled thud and wiped his chin with the back of his hand. Stubble scratched accusingly against the leather of his glove.

His aide dragged another chair across the bare floor to the desk, wood squealing on floorboards, and dropped into the seat. His wireframe glasses slipped down his nose, and he pushed them back up over grey eyes. Reaching out, he placed the flask he'd confiscated in the courtyard back on the desk. "The castellan heard the news."

Lyrarn shrugged. "I expect he did."

"I believe you were writing missives for the king, sir?" Everard's tone, as always, was

formal and inflectionless, the recrimination in his voice too subtle for detection by anyone who didn't know him well. With crisp movements, he pulled a sheet of paper free of its stack and placed it on the desk. He unstopped an ink well with one hand, removed the whisky bottle with the other, and positioned the ink next to Lyrām's elbow. "Galdron is picking out volunteers, fast riders all, to carry word, sir."

Lyrām took the bottle back from Everard and dropped it into the drawer, where the glass rattled around before coming to a stop. He stared at the blank paper with unseeing eyes, aware of the flask still sitting alongside the inkwell. "What difference will it make? Drault will speak against sending aid to us."

"Fortunately the antipathy between yourself and his highness matters not a whit in this instance, sir. Prince Drault has no say in military matters, least of all when an unknown army is at large within our borders."

"No, but Traeburhn does, and he's Drault's dog. He'll fake an investigation, arrange false reports of no unrest, and no aid will come."

Everard's hand darted out, faster than Lyrām thought him capable, and slapped him. Lyrām jerked back in his chair, knocking the inkwell over.

"What the—? Everard! How dare you!" The blow had stung more than hurt.

His aide righted the ink bottle and mopped at the spilled ink with a cloth usually used to clean armour. "I would not strike my lord, but a foolish boy who is sulking and drowning his sorrows in a whisky bottle as an army marches to kill us all? Our lives depend on you, and you, *my lord*, are only in love with death."

The exaggerated sarcasm was impossible to miss. Lyrām rubbed his cheek and scowled. "You make it sound like I am a drunkard."

"You weren't sent out here for exemplary service, sir."

"No, I was sent out here because someone murdered my wife, and because Drault wants me dead!"

Everard folded his hands neatly in his lap, managing to look prim. The small bald spot in the crown of his head gleamed in the sun coming through the arrowslit. "You were sent out here because you foolishly punched a prince in the nose and thought you could get away with it, if I may say so, sir."

No, you may not say so. But an aide had more leeway than any other, and Everard spoke only the truth. It still warmed him, remembering the shock spreading across Drault's face as bright blood bloomed against his skin; the satisfying pain in his hand; the way Drault tumbled to the ground. He'd broken a knuckle on the prince's head, but Drault's nose was no longer as straight as it used to be, nor was his face as pretty as he liked.

"You didn't hear what he said." That came out sulky, and Lyrām gritted his teeth.

"Nobody heard what he said, sir, except you. And while I would never doubt my lord's word, I must observe, sir, that any such accusation would carry more weight coming from the sober son of a duke than from the whisky-soaked commander of a minor castle." Everard's gaze darted towards the portrait.

Lyrām drew a deep breath. Drault's words that day still seared him, had burned deep into his memory: *Where is your whore of a wife today? At home entertaining your vassals?*

Dead. She was already dead and cold when the prince spoke his hateful words, lying abandoned in the snow with an arrow in her back and her throat slit. She'd died alone.

Lyrām curled his fingers into fists until his nails dug into his palms, then let his fingers spring open. "I'll dictate. You write. Three copies. To be handed to the king, and the king *alone*."

The missive was straight-forward, a bald recounting of matters as they stood: a force of

either Velenese troops or the Gallowglaigh mercenary company marching under Velenese colours.

Hired mercenaries would be exactly Drault's style. They'd make it impossible to trace the gold back to their employer, and then he could lay the blame at the Velenese door. But would he really destroy the newly minted peace just for his own personal satisfaction?

Of course he would. Drault would do anything for his own satisfaction.

The irony was that the prince didn't even realise this was part of what made him so hated.

Everard cleared his throat. Flushing, Lyrām resumed his dictation, noting the enemy numbers, their fit-out, the fortifications of the castle as he knew them, a conservative estimate of how long they might hold out, and an appeal for help.

As Everard started on the second copy, Lyrām's mind drifted. Almost absently he picked up the flask from the desk and took a sip. The whisky seemed strangely sweet and didn't burn like it should, but he took another swallow anyway. Everard was wrong. Lyrām's grief and resultant attack on the prince had given Drault the opening needed to have him dismissed from court, but it wasn't the real reason. But how to prove it? He had no evidence, nothing beyond a longstanding antipathy between himself and the crown prince, one born of Lyrām's popularity and the fact his father stood next in line for the throne behind Drault... and the prince's attitude to his Tembran wife. That, and Drault's parting words.

On that late summer day of his departure from the capital, rain sliced down out of a grey sky, soaking the cavalcade to the bone as they waited patiently to be off, sluicing from the armour of his guard and leaving pennants hanging raggedly. Thundering rain on cobbles muffled all sound more than a foot away, and Drault must've known his words would be inaudible to bystanders when he came.

"The rumours have started," he said. "That you killed your own wife. Inevitable, really, when the killer cannot be found to be brought to justice, and you yourself unaccounted for at the time."

Lyrām opened his mouth, then snapped it shut, grinding his teeth so hard it would have been audible if not for the rain. On the day Zaheva lost her life, Drault had absconded from his own hunting party, forcing Lyrām to break up the guards in a futile search for the prince in the woods. That he wound up beating the bushes alone that afternoon seemed unremarkable – until his wife turned up dead. But Drault knew all that.

"I want you to stop denying those rumours." Rain streamed down the prince's face and his eyes glittered through the raindrops clinging to his eyelashes.

"What?" Lyrām couldn't hold the explosion back. "Why would I do that?"

"Because if you don't, I will produce evidence you *did* kill your wife, and ruin you and your entire family."

The cold filtering through Lyrām came from more than the rain. There were ways and means to manufacture such false evidence, and Drault had the power, money, and connections to do so. With all that he possessed, there wasn't much he *couldn't* do.

Taking Lyrām's hand, Drault smiled without showing his teeth. "It's uneventful in the borderlands, I hear. I will pray to Ahura to keep it that way."

And he widened his smile, teeth gleaming now, though with not a hint of warmth reaching his eyes. His grip tightened until Lyrām feared his bones would surely crack.

Around them, the nobles of the court and various soldiers watched, no doubt believing they witnessed a reconciliation and forgiving of all wrongs.

The prince said no more, but the prayer to Ahura for safekeeping was unusual, though not entirely nonsensical. Death, after all, belonged to her; she possessed the power to stop it – or

cause it. But Ahura wasn't Drault's patron god, nor Lyrām's, and he could not shake the memory of that fox's smile, all predatory cunning.

Still, if Drault could frame him for murder, why would he send an army here to kill him? For that matter, why even demand his silence instead of producing the damning evidence? The obvious answer was that Drault would not want to be even incidentally connected to Lyrām's downfall. The common people despised Drault, all while loving and feting Lyrām with wild abandon. Even a passing association with his downfall would reflect badly on Drault, and his marriage was pending now. The quickest way for Drault to end his insecurities would be to settle down and father a child or two, putting that many more rungs in the ladder between Lyrām and the throne.

As if Lyrām wanted to be king anyway.

"Your seal?" Everard said, already spilling red wax on the first copy of the missive.

Lyrām pulled his glove off to reach his signet and pressed the gold into the soft wax, leaving an impression of a coiled dragon encircled by the family motto.

Let sleeping dragons lie.



Chapter 3

Burning Bridges

Lynam strode back down the stairs to the courtyard with the folded missives clutched in his gloved hand, turned the corner out of the stairwell, and stopped when he almost ran into the back of the castellan, Sir Janun, blocking the door to the well room.

"This is a disgrace, father!" The castellan's son, Kastyn, stood facing Sir Janun. The young man—almost a boy really, with the soft blond fuzz of a youth's beard—was clad in court attire that, while dignified on Everard, appeared ridiculous on him. "This is *your* castle," he said, almost spitting the words at the castellan, and his face twisted with its customary sneer, "and you shouldn't give it over to *him* just because he's the jumped-up son of the Duke of Habrodeen."

"On the contrary, Kastyn, I am handing over command because Lord Aharris happens to be the ablest military commander and canniest fighter in the whole of Ahlleyn. If your political knowledge is so scant, you've obviously not been applying yourself to your studies. Return to your room and we will speak shortly."

The castellan wheeled away and started when his gaze fell upon Lynam and Everard, standing in the shadow of the Cortswood suites built along the eastern wall.

Kastyn pushed past them both, shoving his shoulder hard into Lynam as he squeezed past into the stairwell.

"Murderous bastard." Kastyn's voice was so low the words barely reached Lynam's ears. "Like as not you'll murder us all in our sleep like your foreign bitch wife."

The heat of a wildfire temper flashed through Lynam and he lunged, only to be pulled up short by Everard's surprisingly iron-hard grip on his elbow.

"That shit-eating little tit!" Lynam kept his voice low. Aware the castellan was still watching, he plastered a grim smile on his face.

Kastyn disappeared into the stairwell, and Everard released his elbow.

"There'd be less of that if you spoke up in your own defence," Everard said in a sharp undertone.

And if I did that, I'd ruin the entire family. Lynam sagged, all the fury drained from him.

"My lord." Sir Janun made an apologetic bow, made all the more formal by the court garb he'd donned shortly after Lyrām's initial arrival at the castle – or perhaps more importantly, after the arrival of Everard with Lyrām's retinue, in his formal kilt and coat. His blond hair was liberally sprinkled with white. "The boy is young, and I fear I've neglected his education. I should've sent him away to court or to be fostered."

Lyrām grimaced. He despised the political machinations of the majority of the court nobles more than much else in life and did his best not to get mired in their games, but sometimes it wasn't easy. "The court would eat him alive."

The castellan bowed his head in acknowledgement. "No doubt. Lord Aharris, I have heard the news, and I trust you will take command in these troubled times? Your reputation precedes you, and I can only thank Ahura and Chalon for bringing the kingdom's foremost military genius here in our time of need. Most fortuitous!"

Lyrām grimaced again, belatedly turning it into a smile. Maybe the castellan wouldn't notice. Statements like that ruffled Drault's feathers and were what had caused all the trouble in the first place – those, and the whispers that Lyrām would make a better king. Why couldn't Drault be at least half-competent at something so that the people might love him even a little? Competent at something besides scheming and double-crossing, that is.

"If it is your desire, I shall accept graciously." The capitulation saved him the effort of needing to persuade the man to allow him command. Could Janun's son cause him trouble though? Kastyn was sixteen, hot-headed and impetuous, and he clearly didn't like this decision. "Sir Janun, if I may impose, I'll need a full accounting of the stores, of food, water, oil, and anything else necessary to withstanding a siege."

The castellan inclined his head again. "Certainly."

Lyrām watched him rush off, his red-and-green tartan kilt fluttering in the breeze of his passing.

Turning, he spotted Galdron on the far side of the courtyard, standing in its truncated top point nearest the gate with what looked like the castle's entire contingent of horses gathered around him.

"Nicely done, sir," Everard murmured.

"Back to sir, is it?" Lyrām gave him a rueful smile as he scrubbed the growth on his chin. Maybe he should grow a beard. Galdron would have kittens. Maybe even hatchlings. He smirked at the image.

"Of course, sir." Everard stared back with such a smooth expression no one would believe him guilty of even pinching flowers.

"I didn't do anything, anyway. He just surrendered everything to me."

"Such is the nature of your reputation."

Lyrām grunted, and strode across to Galdron. If his reputation were a little less stellar, Drault might fear and hate him a little less. But Drault had fought at the Siege of Invergahr as well. He could have broken the enemy line against all odds, could have held the men together until help came; instead, he'd spent the long eleven days of the siege shivering in fear in the top of the broken tower they'd fortified against the sudden border incursion. Few Ahlleyn troops survived that last day, and fewer Velenese, but every last one of them remembered Lyrām leading what they all believed to be a doomed last charge while Drault whimpered in the tower. When the Ahlleyn army arrived and drove off the Velenese, they'd found Drault still there with his head between his knees.

Three soldiers huddled nervously beside the horses, while Galdron stood at parade rest. Two were long-standing soldiers from Lyrām's guard, Ogrim and Terihna, a man and woman

he knew well for they had served for going on ten years now. The other was Phelip, barely more than a lad. The blood had drained from the young soldier's face, leaving him chalky white, and he clenched his reins in a white-knuckled grip. All wore standard issue armour for Lynam's guard: full boiled leather plate over mail, with plaids in assorted colours tossed over the top for warmth, and open-faced helms on their heads.

Galdron clapped his helm on over his red fringe of hair and saluted. "Sir. Two volunteers to ride for the capital, sir, and one for the border castles."

Everard distributed the missives, while Lynam clapped shoulders and exchanged soft words. Eyes watched from the ramparts, though when he glanced around, each soldier on the walls stood with his or her back to the courtyard. Palpable tension filled the castle.

"Phelip, ride for whichever border castle you can get to and deliver your message to the castellan. Ogrim, Terihna, hand your message to the king, and the king alone. Not to Chancellor Traeburhn, not to Prince Drault, not even to my father, Duke Habrodeen. *Only* to the king. Understand?"

The two older soldiers exchanged confused glances.

Terihna snapped a salute, her mail rattling. "Yes, sir!"

Ogrim followed her lead, and all three tucked their dispatches away safely in their saddlebags.

Galdron hustled them on to their horses, then passed each the lead rein of a spare horse.

"Chalon speed you, and the cradle of life carry you." Lynam lifted a hand in benediction, and the messengers turned their horses for the barbican and its multiple gates.

Everard beckoned to him from the foot of the tower stairs.

Lynam followed his aide up to the top of the turret. They stood on the eastern of the two gate towers, which afforded them a view directly down to the bridge spanning the moat, out over the northern hills and the marsh to east and west.

"We should burn the bridge," Lynam said, the clanking of the portcullis almost drowning out his words.

Everard, ever poised to respond instantly to his lord's needs, turned towards him, eyebrows lifting. "We would be trapped."

"We're already trapped."

A muffled thunder of hooves announced the departure of the messengers, and all along the wall heads turned to follow their progress. The horses raced out of the shadows of the gate, necks stretched out and manes flying, their riders crouched low in the saddle, plaids flapping.

The thud of boots on the stairs behind distracted Lynam from the sight. Two of the castle's regular guard emerged sideways from the narrow spiral stairs, carrying a barrel between them. Seeing Lynam, they hesitated, unable to salute with their hands full. He signalled two of the soldiers manning the battlements to assist, and the four soldiers lowered the barrel to the floor.

"Naphtha, sir," said one of the guards, tossing off a casual salute. He was one of the castle soldiers, clad in mail with various mismatched pieces of cuir bouilli and iron making an incomplete chest harness. His companion wore lamellar of a poorer quality than Galdron's. "Castellan's orders."

"Good man." Lynam turned back to the wall. The castellan's soldiers were generally armed to a lower standard than his own, reflecting the difference in wealth between the Aharris clan and Janun's Maggrigs—a difference that was now critical.

The messengers had cleared the long narrow bridge and were galloping across the meadow between the two walls. Before long they would be lost from sight, through the old gate and into the hills.

The tiny dark shapes of men appeared in the trees blanketing the hills outside the ruined wall, a mere dozen or so, but with bows slung over their shoulders. Lyrum pulled the eyeglass from his belt, goosebumps prickling his skin. Not bows—*crossbows*. Now, there in the trees, stood the horses the crossbowmen had used to arrive so quickly. The men lined up in the gateway and pulled the weapons from their shoulders, winding winches to load them.

At the sight of the crossbowmen, the messengers scattered, their horses veering away from the gateway. Their mail and leather plate was useless against a quarrel, but crossbows were slow to load. They depended on speed for escape.

Lyrum leaned forward, clenching the battlements with his free hand, the eyeglass pressed almost painfully into his eye socket. The riders were moving too far away now to make out much detail. *Ride, damn you, ride like there's a dragon breathing fire up your arse.*

One of the riders jerked, the impact of a quarrel throwing him out of his saddle. Lyrum jerked as well, but held the glass to the scene. The horse shied violently, but the man's foot caught in the stirrup, and his mount dragged him down the length of the wall and out of sight. A murmur of dismay rose from the watching guards.

Lyrum clutched the eyeglass tighter, sweeping the scene in search of the other two riders. There in the grass, identifiable by the long tail of hair under her helm, Terihna lay motionless. Quarrels pincushioned her body. He pounded his free hand against the battlements until it throbbed.

"Close the gates!" Lyrum swept the glass to and fro, seeking out the third rider.

He found the messenger beyond the outer wall. Somehow the rider had broken through the encircling crossbowmen and now charged across the hills. For only a bare moment did Lyrum retain sight of the rider pressed low along his horse's neck before the beast carried him away into the hills—a split second to register a quarrel protruding from his man's back. Alive, or dead? And if the first, for how long?

Lyrum exchanged a bleak look with Everard, and signalled the nearest soldier.

"Open that cask." He crossed and took a torch from the entrance to the stairs.

Two guards used small hatchets to smash the lid of the barrel, splintering the wood with a loud crack.

"Pour it over the wall, on the bridge," Lyrum said. "Toss the cask after."

The naphtha poured from the barrel in a black, viscous stream, staining the timber of the bridge and splattering all along the aged wood and up the pink stones of the castle in a rain of death. The soldiers on the north towers and nearby walls watched in silence, their faces grim. When the barrel struck the solid surface of the bridge with an echoing crash, Lyrum leaned out through a crenel and dropped the torch.

The flickering orange of the flame seemed to take forever to fall.

When it landed, the bridge erupted in flames, surging twenty feet high and engulfing the near end of the bridge. A wash of heat swept upwards, and the soldiers averted their faces. A thick, black plume of oily smoke curled into the sky.

Lyrum turned away, the rising heat almost enough to scald his face and the acrid stink thick in his nostrils.

It began.



Chapter 4

Gift of the Goddess

Lynam stared into the rainy haze of the early morning darkness, the absence of Zaheva plucking at his soul like a master musician wringing plaintive notes from harp strings. After almost a year, the initial fury, tears and desperate anger had faded into an empty ache the whisky couldn't fill. Every time he remembered she was gone, it was like turning around and finding his own hand missing. Every time he remembered the whole world blamed him for her death, it was another kick to the gut.

The soft drizzle brushed against the bare skin of his face and dripped down his back beneath his gambeson. With Everard asleep, his mail and cuir bouilli plate remained on its rack. His open-faced helm, though, sat abandoned on the battlements, purple plumes bedraggled by the wet. Grimacing, he leaned against a pink limestone merlon and took another draught from his flask. So far sleep had eluded him tonight, and at this hour the chances he'd return to bed were slim. The whisky burned hot and almost sickly-sweet down his throat, but didn't touch the frozen ball of loneliness and anguish in his stomach.

He tried to shake off the black emotions and focus on the army out in the dark and the rain. Although the enemy lacked the soldiers to encircle the castle, they didn't need to do so. A deep marsh at the rear of the keep was impassable to any significant number of men, keeping the besiegers out – and the defenders in. A few fires burned out in the darkness beyond the ruined wall, but they gave no true indication of the size of the enemy force.

Closing the flask, he glanced down at the blackened ruins of the bridge. The drizzle set in only after the fire had already consumed most of the structure, and very little remained. Shivering, he drew his plaid around himself more tightly. A futile gesture; after more than an hour in the wet, the garment hung in sodden folds and dragged at his shoulders.

"A wet night, my lord."

He jerked in surprise, banging his knee against the wall. "Dragon's balls!"

Down the wall, a pair of soldiers stirred and glanced towards the noise.

Rubbing the knee surreptitiously, Lynam turned to fix the shadowed shape with an accusing eye. Leinahre, holding the long skirts of her kirtle out of the puddles dotting the tower

top, drew closer. A plaid protected her hair from the rain and hung down around her body to blur the curves of her figure. As she neared him, the planes of her face took shape. Darkness leached the colour from the night, leaving her in shades of grey and robbing her kirtle of its distinctive tartan pattern. Only her black hair, unusual for Ahlley, retained its deep midnight darkness.

"Too wet for you to be out, Leinahre. Too early for you to be out of bed." The words came out slurred, and he struggled to focus. Too much whisky; not enough sleep.

"And you, my lord." She stopped a few paces short of him.

"I couldn't sleep." He never slept these days, not without enough whisky in him to drown a dragon. When he did, only nightmares populated the dreamscape of his mind – and not all of them came from the bottle. "And the walls needed checking. You should go to bed and get what rest you can. Everyone is going to be busy in a few hours."

Leinahre was his secretary – had been his wife's, actually, but he kept her on after the tragedy. Everard was always overburdened, and an assistant had been just what he needed. Besides which, Leinahre was the youngest daughter of a minor nobleman in vassalage to the Aharris family, and it didn't do to cast aside those to whom you had obligations. After ten years of having her around, he was too fond of the girl to send her home with nothing to show for her service. Perhaps he could help her with an advantageous marriage; yes, that would just be the thing, a marriage to a higher-ranked nobleman, the kind her father could never broker without Lyrar's influence. Only in her early twenties, she was still young enough to attract a good match.

"Who can sleep now, and here? With that out there?" Leinahre shivered and stepped closer. "Unquiet ghosts walk these walls, my lord. Ahura is near.... I can feel her."

A shiver ran through him too. Women had a closer affinity to the goddess of death, and only women served Ahura. She seemed a constant part of their life once they reached child-bearing age. But no soldier needed to be told death lurked close at hand on the eve of battle, nor wanted the reminder. Besides, unquiet spirits were part and parcel of his life, now. The breeze almost sounded like Zaheva whispering in his ear.

"There will be death aplenty."

She nodded and looked into his eyes. "I'm certain of it, my lord." The darkness turned her blue eyes to huge, shadowed pools, and her face was wan beneath trails of rain, a reminder of the beautiful frailty of human life.

If only I'd gotten the women and children to safety before this all started.

She stepped closer again, reaching out to twine her fingers into his gloved hand and squeeze in gratitude. "I offered prayers of thanks to Chalon you are here. We could not ask for a better commander."

He opened his mouth to point out that no commander could overcome sufficiently poor odds, but the words stuck in his throat. No one wanted to hear that.

"How long do you think we can hold out, my lord?"

He disentangled his fingers gently, clearing his throat. "Uh, well. It depends. Caisteal Aingeal is almost impregnable, but we're heavily outnumbered."

Footsteps echoed out of the distant stairwell, the sound distorted by the dark and the rain. The torches in the entrance to the stair turret flickered fitfully as someone passed, but the shadows hid who approached.

Leinahre moved closer and stood on tiptoes to kiss his cheek, her lips as fleeting as the first winter's kiss of snow – an almost shocking sensation in the rainy solitude of the night.

"You will bring us home safe, my lord. Good morn."

Lynam put his hand to his cheek and stared after her. That had been a little more forward than was appropriate for his secretary, even as an expression of gratitude in an understandably frightening time. She'd only been thirteen when she first joined the household, and the transition from girl to woman, and adjusting to their respective roles of vassal and master, had at times been awkward. He'd thought them past that, but perhaps the stress of the situation was taking its toll.

Everard appeared out of the darkness, approaching down the wall and passing Leinahre as she swayed back towards the gate-tower stairs. Dawn had crept up unawares, lightening the sky enough to reveal the suspicion written across his face as he stopped alongside.

"What did she want?"

"Nothing but to talk. She had trouble sleeping."

Everard gave him a sceptical glance, pushing his slipping spectacles up his nose. "A wise man treads warily with women."

"Advice from *you* on women?" Lynam laughed. "You're too suspicious, Everard. The court is rife with politics – a glance laden with meaning, a whispered word of poison – but not everyone plays those games."

"Mmhm." Everard leaned against the crenels, and jerked back with a grimace. Water had soaked the sleeves of his coat and the folds of his plaid, ruining his ridiculous display of impeccable presentation so early in the morning. "A man doesn't need a wife, or need to want one, to know how much trouble they can be."

Lynam glanced at him sidelong. "You don't want to be out here."

His aide sniffed. "No man in his right mind would want to be out here, but this is where you are."

Lynam said nothing, allowing the silence to drag. The location suited his mood – grim, lonely and melancholy – a mood not eased by either Leinahre's or Everard's presence.

Everard cleared his throat. "You meant what you said, about this being a strike at you?"

He lowered his voice. "Yes. You believe me?"

"Your reasons?"

Lynam's hands curled against the rough, wet stone. What to say? He had enough enemies that more than one person wanted him dead at any one time. His family was popular with the people, but much less popular with the nobility; their refusal to play at politics and their legendary inability to be bribed left many at court disgruntled and sour.

Blackmail is the tool of choice against those who cannot be bribed.

A shiver went through the length of him, and he glanced down the wall. Soldiers manned the walls, and who knew how far sound might carry? If he answered Everard's question, he needed to do so without reference to Drault's blackmail; he couldn't risk repercussions for his family. The only safe secret was one never shared.

"What's here, Everard? A shrine to Ahura, significant only to a few religious nuts, and certainly not a point of political dissension. This castle is too deep into the Borders to be raided – unless the border keeps have already fallen...."

"A possibility."

Lynam snorted. "That force never took Keep Kragmyre or the Howling Castle – though I'll concede this might be only a splinter of such a host."

"Your real point, I think, is that *you* are here."

"Yes."

"Other people might want you dead beside the prince, though. Any number of people were thwarted when you ended the feud between us and Vena, and many are unhappy about

sealing the peace with a union between Prince Drault and Princess Hahlyna. I hear Sayella's father is one of them."

Lynam sighed, and placed one boot against the wall, leaning forward to rest on his own knee. "The earl has never formally acknowledged his fathering of Sayella."

"That doesn't mean he wouldn't use her," Everard said. "And it doesn't have to be him anyway – another Velenese noble could have put this in motion."

Everard's argument couldn't be easily rebutted, and his head still swam from the whisky. He rubbed his fingers against the pounding that had started in his temples.

An attempt at personal retribution wouldn't carry the might of Velen behind it, and so probably *couldn't* capture either border castle, which left the question of how the force out there had made it this far – unless the besieging commander somehow conspired to slip past either castle without a battle....

Such a thing wouldn't be easy. A few men across the border here, a few there.... Soldiers disguised as merchants, or travellers, coming across the border at every pass possible. While the border was open and technically such a plan was possible, it seemed farfetched and would require months if not years of planning. Or one might make use of a mercenary company already within the borders of Ahleyn on legitimate business. Sayella could have brought her Gallowglaighs across the border more or less openly, subject to the usual restrictions on mercenary companies.

Besieging a castle required more than just men, though. Both options required the enemy soldiers to build their own siege equipment, as they wouldn't be able to bring that across the border, and then what about supply lines? Merchant caravans, perhaps, until news of the invasion reached the Border Lords and they sealed the border. That would explain why the enemy had been so assiduous in preventing any messengers leaving. But that was a very risky strategy. The enemy might use a frictionnaire, if one powerful enough and amenable enough could be found. If so, hopefully keeping the army supplied would leave him too exhausted to use his magic in the battles.

"Well, I concede you could be right. It is theoretically possible, at least." Lynam sighed again. "But the enemy would be trapped within our territory with a significant number of hostile troops between him and the border. It would be a suicide mission, years in the planning. Someone would have to hate me very much."

"This peace has been years in negotiations, and I can think of three Velenese off-hand who hate you that much."

Lynam grimaced and dropped his foot, pushing away a lock of sodden hair that slipped into his eyes. Rain and the night turned it almost black. Those Everard referred to – two men and a woman – were dedicated Velenese patriots, outspoken against the impending marriage and vociferous in their bile-laden hate for Lynam. The Butcher of Invergahr, wasn't that what they called him? *As if I killed anyone who wasn't trying to kill me.*

He reached for his whisky flask again, then dropped his hand. He'd had enough for one night and would need his wits about him when the sun rose. It was bad enough he'd not slept this night without adding more liquor to the exhaustion blanketing his brain.

Lynam stared at the bland face of his aide through streamers of rain sparkling in the torchlight. "You think this an attempt to take us back to the bad old days?"

"It would put an end to the marriage and the peace with it. The mere fact that Velen had crossed the border and attacked the castle might do that, unless King Jorgen punishes those responsible very severely. If they *actually* succeed in killing you... the Velenese zealots would be very happy when all the treaties unravelled, *and* they would feel vindicated against you

personally.”

The theory possessed a certain elegant simplicity that Lyrām’s own lacked. If Drault wanted him dead, why didn’t he produce his so-called evidence that Lyrām was a murderer? Zaheva’s connections with the Tembran nobility meant they’d almost certainly call for Lyrām’s death, and King Alagondar would be pressured to go along for diplomatic reasons. Or Drault could assassinate him. That would be a far simpler solution than this elaborate cloak and dagger routine...

Lyrām knuckled his head. The play and counterplay of battle strategy came to him naturally in a way that the manoeuvring of politics did not, and now his head ached. Drault might want him ruined rather than dead, otherwise he’d become a martyr to the common people. And even a rumour of the prince’s involvement in Lyrām’s death would destroy what little reputation the prince had with the people. By contrast, Lyrām’s tragic death in what appeared to be a border squabble with Velena would go unremarked in internal Ahlleyne politics – though not, of course, in foreign relations. But he dare not say any of that to Everard without explaining the blackmail. And would Drault really risk the peace to kill him? *My ego is out of control.*

Something flickered out in the grey twilight of fading night. Lyrām leaned forward over the cold, wet stones, his mail scraping on the wall. “Did you see that?”

“What?” Everard folded his arms inside his plaid and peered into the dark with a marked lack of enthusiasm.

“A light....” Lyrām pointed at the elusive, bobbing light, winking in and out of sight. “A torch?”

He fumbled for his eyeglass on his belt, raised it, and swept the fading darkness. The movement made his head spin dizzily. A glow flickered through the glass, and he reversed direction, scanning more slowly. A woman’s face leapt into view, illuminated by the torch she carried.

He stared, transfixed, the eyeglass pressed hard to his face. “Zaheva...”

Everard snatched the glass from him. After a moment to get the eyeglass aligned with his rain-dotted spectacles and locate the woman, he frowned, his brow wrinkling under his thinning grey hair. “How did a girl get here? And a Tembran at that.”

Lyrām took the glass back from his aide. “Perhaps more to the point, how did she get between the castle’s walls?”

While scaling the outer wall was theoretically possible, surely the enemy patrolled it now, and why would a girl walk into an obvious warzone?

He peered at the woman again. Everard was right: she was Tembran, like Zaheva, with their typical black hair and porcelain skin. He stared, paralysed. Memories flashed through his head, of his wife’s body battered and broken, her skirts about her hips, blood smearing her thighs. He squeezed his eyes shut against sight of the girl, against the torrent of memories. Chalon help him, if he’d not been delayed, if he’d met Zaheva like he promised, she wouldn’t now be dead. The images of that day beat against the inside of his eyelids, and his fear that the same might happen to this girl deepened.

“I think they’ve seen her.” Everard pointed towards the enemy encampment.

Lyrām swung the glass in that direction. With sunrise on the horizon, and the rain eased to a light mist, movement was visible in the old gate. A rider led a horse through a small group of soldiers. Behind him, archers streamed up, taking places along the inside of the outer wall.

“Ahura’s blade.” Lyrām lowered the glass.

“They won’t attack her, will they?” Everard hovered, his stork-like frame hunched in

worry.

“Those men besieging us are more likely mercenaries than the enlisted men of any nation. They could do anything to a lone woman, particularly in the course of *interrogating* her. They’ll want to be sure she’s not a spy. Bring me a horse!”

The guard nearest the tower stair jumped, abandoned his pike, and disappeared down the steps in a clatter of mailed feet.

Everard seized him by the arm. “You can’t go out there!”

Lynam shook him off impatiently, snatched up his helm and started down the stairs. “I can and I will.”

Everard hurried after him, huffing and puffing in the enclosed space as he tried to keep up on the narrow, winding stairs.

Lynam burst from the lower doorway into the lightening courtyard. The guard led a saddled horse from the small stable, and at sight of Lynam he broke into a trot, pulling the horse behind him. The animal shook its mane impatiently and lengthened its stride.

Lynam bellowed for the gates to be opened. As the inner portcullis cranked up, the sound of the bolts releasing on the successive gates echoed through the courtyard, and gate guards ran to open each portal.

Lynam stared through the open barbican at the blackened remains of the bridge.

“The bridge is gone,” Everard said.

“I think there’s a portable sally bridge in the armoury, my lord.” The soldier holding the horse ducked his head by way of acknowledgement of his commander. One of the castellan’s men, he wore no plate over his mail. “The castle keeps one for this eventuality – so we still have access out of the castle if the permanent bridge is destroyed. I don’t know what condition it’s in.”

Lynam took the reins from him. “Go. Find it.”

The soldier raced away, calling other guards to assist him. They disappeared into the armoury at the far end of the courtyard, square against the cold smithy. After long minutes they emerged again, wrestling a long awkward span of wood between them.

“I don’t know how much good that will do you.” The castellan stepped up to join Lynam, giving him a wry smile. “It’s designed to sit atop the existing frame, in case the bridge is rendered unusable in wartime by axe. Not fire.”

He understood. Too much damage and the underlying structure wouldn’t support the portable bridge. “I only need two trips.” Lynam shoved one boot into the stirrup.

Everard seized his arm, pulling him back down.

“You can’t go! What if it’s a trap? What if she’s a spy? You said yourself the enemy would suspect it. What fools would we be to discount the chance? And she’s a Tembran, at that. If either of us is right...” He lowered his voice, though he kept his words circumspect. “What better way to lure you out?”

“We can always toss her in the prison, but we *can’t* bring her back from the dead.” More likely Drault, by Everard’s logic that a Tembran woman could be used to draw him out, since any faceless Velenese enemies would likely believe he’d killed his own wife. Lynam shook Everard off. “I cannot stand here and let them take her. I cannot lie awake at night wondering what fate might await her. I must at least try.”

“Then send someone else!”

Lynam seized Everard by the front of his coat and leaned close to his aide’s face. “Don’t you understand, Everard? Every day I live in a hell of my own making, knowing that but for my broken promise, Zaheva would still be alive and well. No penance will ever expiate that sin.”

Everard's nose wrinkled and he tried to draw back; with the amount of whisky Lyrām had drunk, his breath must reek of alcohol.

A soldier called down from the ramparts. "Sir, the enemy rider has left their lines!"

"There's no time!" Lyrām let go of his aide, and spun back to the horse, swinging quickly into the saddle, then pulled the plumed helm from his head and thrust it at a soldier. "Your helm, man."

For a moment they juggled helmets, until Lyrām shoved the man's unadorned one upon his head. The horse danced under him, sensing the nervous excitement.

Lyrām looked over his shoulder at Sir Janun. "Have the longbowmen form up on the battlements, my lord. In case I need cover."

Everard almost bounced on his toes. "In love with death, I said. You'll be the death of us all! You're not thinking straight!"

Probably what he wanted to say was that Lyrām had been drinking too much to think straight, but he wouldn't voice that aloud where the men could hear. Lyrām brought the horse around in a ringing of iron-shod hooves on cobbles. The details of Everard's further protests were lost in the noise. Lyrām's head spun at the sudden movement, and he put one hand to his head. *Is Everard right...?* No, he hadn't had as much whisky as usual, and only one drink in the last hour or so.

Galdron burst from a door at the far end of the courtyard, waving his arms for Lyrām to stop as the soldiers ran the portable bridge out atop the burnt timbers and shoved it to the other side.

Lyrām clapped his heels to the horse's flanks, and the horse leapt into motion as the soldiers retreated to either side of the castle gate. *I couldn't save her.*

But he could save this girl.

If he'd come home when he said he would, he could have saved Zaheva.

The bridge shook and creaked as the horse pounded across. As the weight of the horse and rider passed over it, a supporting timber groaned and collapsed, and the whole bridge tilted to one side. Hooves scrabbled for purchase as their centre of gravity shifted, leaving Lyrām with the horrible sensation of falling backwards.

Then the horse surged forward and thudded onto the grassy path.

Behind them, soldiers shouted as they grabbed for the bridge, trying to save the structure from a gurgling demise in the moat. His galloping mount carried him away before he learned its fate.

With his eyes stung by the wind and misted rain, Lyrām could barely see the woman. The sun breasted the horizon, a shaft of light breaking through the clouds and dazzling with its brilliance but leaving the rest of the meadow blanketed under shadow. His head pounded in time with the hoof beats.

The girl turned towards the castle, her shapeless peasant dress blowing in the fresh breeze despite the drizzle. Behind her, the enemy rider closed in, and farther away, back in the enemy lines, more riders mounted up.

Lyrām thinned his lips, grim in the face of poor odds. The girl was closer to the castle than the old wall, but the other rider had a headstart. He bent low over his mount's neck, coaxing more speed from the animal with whispered words of encouragement.

Too slow. The other rider drew closer. He would reach the woman before Lyrām by only by a few heartbeats, but that was enough for the enemy rider to kill her. This was a fool's errand. Why hadn't he listened to Everard?

The cold wind and the stinging rain cleared his head. The enemy rider closed on the

woman, drawing his sword to strike, and *still* she didn't turn; instead, she watched Lynam's fast approach with apparent unconcern. Snarling, he angled his horse towards the other rider. Didn't she hear the thundering hooves behind her? Dropping the reins, he kicked his feet free of the stirrups, got one foot atop the saddle, and threw himself across the intervening distance.

His horse carried him past the girl, who sidestepped away. She was nothing but a flash of black dress and white face as he jumped. The enemy rider's eyes opened wide an instant before Lynam caught him around the shoulders. In a tumble of legs and arms, they spilled over the horse's rump.

Lynam crashed to the ground, knocking the breath from him and grass whipping his face. Gasping, he forced himself to his knees, then wobbled to his feet.

The woman stood observing the spectacle. Though the soldier had struck the ground mere feet from her and was already on his feet, moving towards her, her face reflected only a resigned calmness.

The man reached for her with his free hand. Time oozed with the slowness of poured honey.

"No!" Lynam choked the word into a strangled gasp, and broke into an unsteady run.

One step.

The girl brought one long-fingered white hand up in a gesture of – what? Supplication? Forestalling? Defence even.

Two steps.

The soldier seized her by the wrist. With her other hand, she reached out and touched the boiled leather plate over his chest.

Three steps.

The sword dropped from the soldier's fingers. In one fluid motion, he crumpled at the knees and fell face-first into the knee-high grass.

Time snapped back to normal, and Lynam skidded to a stop over the motionless soldier.

The fallen man didn't move a muscle. Dropping to one knee, Lynam reached for the man's neck, seeking a pulse – but he stopped before touching him. The skin was blue with such intense cold that it chilled his fingers where they hovered several inches short of contact. He let his hand drop back to his side.

A shadow darkened the dim, rainy haze of the morning and he glanced up. A colourless face loomed over him, alabaster skin, midnight hair made all the darker by contrast, and eyes so black the pupils could barely be distinguished. What he'd taken for a homespun peasant dress was instead the billowing black robe of a priestess of Ahura.

She met his gaze with a chill that should have left snowflakes in the air, and he shivered, despite the hot, sweaty aftermath of battle. This close, there was nothing of Zaheva in her stern face.

"That was not necessary," she said, speaking Ahlleyyn with the same lilting accent as Zaheva.

"Forgive me, Sister," he answered in Tembran, a reflex response to the familiar accent of his wife, and her eyes flickered a fraction in surprise. Backing off, he sketched a bow. When he straightened and met her gaze again, the skin around her eyes tightened with suppressed emotion.

Though she couldn't be more than a dragon's heartbeat past twenty, if that, she wore the gravitas of a much older woman. She clutched a long, thin package, wrapped and tied round with knotted cords. At one end, the wrappings were torn open, and she was working to loosen the knots, her hands blocking his view of the object inside.

"I am Ellaeva," she said in Ahlley, despite his use of her own language, and extended a hand.

The name didn't so much ring bells as send them tolling in alarm. He knew it. Everyone knew it. *Ciotach an Bhais* they called her in Ahlley, behind her back at least. The Left Hand of Death. In other lands she was known more simply as the Death Priestess. Ahura had many priestesses dedicated to death, but only one Death Priestess.

His gaze dropped to the dead man. Well, that explained that.

Shaking her hand, particularly over the corpse of a man slain by her touch, held all the appeal of the gallows, but he met her gaze squarely and took her hand. Keeping his face calm took every ounce of will he possessed. Her grip tightened against his, her palm and fingers callused from sword work.

With their hands still clasped, she stepped nearer. He tensed, resisting the urge to pull away.

A hissing sound broke through the brightening light of the morning.

"What—?" He half-turned, but her grip held him close.

Arrows scythed down out of the sky in a deadly rain. Lyrax flinched and braced for the impact, but the arrows thudded into the ground around them. His heart galloped in his chest as one arrow struck something unseen and bounced several feet away to vanish into the long grass.

"Mount up!" Ellaeva turned him towards his horse, which grazed fifty yards away in the meadow outside the hail of arrows. Still gripping his hand, she dragged him into a run.

They passed the dead soldier's horse, thrashing and squealing in pain with arrows jutting from its flesh. At the old gate, the soldiers he saw earlier preparing to ride out were filing through the narrow aperture. A dozen, maybe more. Behind them, a fresh cloud of black arrows lifted into the air from archers lining the inside of the wall.

As they reached the horse, she released her grip, and Lyrax swung up into the saddle. He reached down to offer her a hand, but she ignored it and climbed up behind him. She slipped her arms around his waist. Her touch was cool and impersonal. He almost shuddered, suppressing the reaction only through great effort.

He clapped heels to the horse's flanks, urging it into a trot and then a gallop. Ellaeva tightened her grip as the sudden transition almost tossed her off the back of the saddle. More arrows hissed down, burying themselves in the winter-brown grass. Ellaeva prayed under her breath, a continuous stream of words just beyond comprehension, and no arrows fell in the cocoon surrounding them, though a few spun away.

Then no more arrows fell, for the enemy riders were within the range of their troops' bows. He urged the horse on, the pink limestone of the castle battlements drawing nearer. Each stride jolted Ellaeva against him. Soldiers stood atop the parapet, waving swords and pikes. The cheers reached his ears only faintly.

"Damnation! The bridge."

Ellaeva pressed close to his back. "What about the bridge?"

"It's gone. Or damaged. I don't know."

He drew rein as they approached the edge of the moat, the cheering of his troops filling his ears.

Ellaeva slid down the horse's rump and stooped to examine the bridge footings. A piece of charred timber crumbled beneath her probing foot. She glanced past him as he swung down from the saddle.

"I suggest we start swimming." Without stopping, and with the long bundle now slung

over her back, she turned and dove into the waters.

Cursing, Lyrain tossed aside his borrowed helm, and struggled to pull his leather tabard and gambeson over his head. Good thing Everard hadn't woken earlier, or he'd be peeling off his plate. A quick glance revealed the riders drawing nearer. One of them clutched a horsebow in his hand. *Dragon balls, where are my archers?* He searched the walls, but he was too close to tell what was going on above. He dropped the gambeson on the ground and kicked his boots off, trying to keep an eye on the castle and the riders at the same time.

Ellaeva, swimming with a strong stroke, was already halfway across. Behind him, the rider nocked an arrow.

Cursing, he dove.

As he surfaced, the cold shock of the water numbing him to the bone, arrows began falling from the walls above.



chapter 5

Aut Agere Aut Mori

Ellaeva hauled herself out of the water, heavy black robes shedding buckets of water. Soldiers rushed out of the shadows of the barbican to help drag her to dry ground. She stiffened under their unaccustomed touch, but didn't resist. Soon enough they'd have little desire to touch her anyway. No need to hurry it along.

A soldier thoughtfully bought towels to her, and Ellaeva draped one around her shoulders, already shivering in the brisk spring air.

Behind her, her would-be rescuer surged the last few feet through the water and seized hold of the stones edging the moat. Eager hands reached down, grabbing his arms under his shoulders, and his hands, and pulling him out of the water bodily. Suddenly abandoned in a cacophony of shouts as soldiers hustled forward to help, she stepped back until her back pressed against the cool stone of the castle wall. She cradled her wrapped sword in the crook of one elbow.

The auburn-haired warrior, rivers of water running from his body, accepted a towel and dried off his unkempt hair.

Her gaze strayed, roving around the men in search of whoever might be in charge.

One man offered her a goblet that steamed faintly in the brisk chill of the still early morning. The scent of spiced wine reached her nostrils, and she waved him off. Another man thrust a goblet at the soaked soldier.

"Mulled wine, sir?"

Sir. So he was an officer of some kind. Perhaps that explained why no one else appeared to be here to organise the mob of soldiers.

"Thanks, Padran." The officer draped the towel over his shoulder, took the warm drink gratefully, and slapped the guard on the shoulder with his free hand.

The man smiled in response.

A good officer, then, one who knew the importance of cementing the loyalty of his men.

As the soldier started away, the officer caught him by the shoulder. "Did we lose the bridge?"

Ellaeva's gaze drifted to the ruins of the bridge frame. Not much remained except a few blackened pylons barely sitting above the lapping water. In the distance, the enemy riders cantered back towards the ruined gate, driven off by the castle archers.

"No, sir." The soldier stiffened into parade rest. "But the old pylons need examination before we can use it again. Even at best, I doubt it will hold a horse."

The officer nodded and gave his man a quick salute. He looked over and met Ellaeva's gaze, and immediately started towards her, navigating the soldiers milling in the barbican.

"You should drink," he said. "It will warm you."

She turned a cool eye on him, assessing him from top to toe. Water pooled at his feet from his dripping clothes. "Liquor is forbidden the Order of Ahura."

"I thought those vows didn't apply to you."

She almost frowned, then smoothed her face clear of visible annoyance. Everyone seemed to think she was different. Well, she was – just not in the way they thought. Only summoned to serve once every ten generations or so, a Battle Priestess was granted any number of powers direct from the goddess. If anything, that meant she enjoyed less freedom than the average priestess of Ahura. "Yes and no. A Battle Priestess only swears some vows. The vow to do no violence is obviously waived, as is the vow of poverty – a Battle Priestess may carry a certain amount of wealth in her arms and equipment, and that is unavoidable – but the vows of loyalty and chastity, and the rule forbidding strong liquor, all remain."

An awkward silence stretched, and he shifted uncomfortably, probably wondering why Ahura had decided to summon a Battle Priestess, and why she was here. A Battle Priestess was always called against some dire need.

The bundle under her arm slipped, and she tried to hitch it up, but fumbled. The officer caught it before it hit the cobbles. She had to force herself not to snatch it back from him, and her retrieval was less nonchalant than she'd have liked. There was no way he could know what it was, wrapped in oilskins as it was and with the cord knotted tight in a half-dozen places, but she never liked it when a man touched Ahura's blade. Red wax bearing the impression of the dragon of Ahura sealed the knots, except at the end she'd broken open so she could use the sword's power to deflect the arrows.

His breath smelt of whisky. So, she hadn't imagined that out on the battlefield.

He smiled, ignoring the way she almost snatched her package from him. "Perhaps your holiness would like a hot bath? The castle has limited facilities, but we have a small bathhouse."

"I would rather speak with the commander first." She clutched the wrapped blade possessively to her chest.

The officer hesitated, and then his grin broadened. He bowed. "You already are."

Her eyebrows flew up before she could stop them, but he was already striding off, calling a name and ordering the soldiers back through the close, dark confines of the barbican to the courtyard.

A balding man in lamellar armour appeared, his ginger beard speckled with grey and bristling like an angry bear, and chivvied the guards back inside.

Ellaeva followed, smoothing her expression, and followed him through the barbican. That tipsy, unkempt, and brashly cheerful man was *Lyram Aharris*? Had anyone noticed her surprise? In all the years she'd been reading about him, never had she imagined *this*.

And yet, he'd ridden out alone, believing he was all that stood between her and a rampaging army. Why? Why not send some soldiers? Why take the risk at all? She shook her head. Everything she'd read about Aharris had been about his military genius, his strategy and tactics, but very little about the man himself – aside from some untrustworthy gossip and

rumour, and most of that centred around the murder of his wife.

She did know one other thing about him though. *Aut agere aut mori* — the ancient motto of his clan, once fallen into disuse but now taken for his own. *Do or die*.

Was that a clue as to why he'd come out after her?

As the tunnel cleared, soldiers shutting each of the multitude of gates as they went, the portcullis began to crank back into place. The solid *clank* of all the bolts on all the gates shooting home at once, driven by the gears in the gatehouse, echoed into the courtyard.

"Bring a meal to the withdrawing room," Aharris said to a dignified, stork-like man in formal court attire. "For two. More mulled wine, and hot tea. And find Sister Ellaeva something dry to wear. She can't sit dripping on the carpets. Perhaps the sisters can help. Then draw a hot bath. One or the other of us is going to need it."

The man leaned close to Aharris and whispered something in his ear. The only word Ellaeva caught was "fool", and then Aharris turned on his heel and strode off.

The grey-haired man smiled thinly at Ellaeva. It was an expression that held very little warmth, and one she'd seen on the faces of many aides determined to protect their lords, with equal assiduousness, from inconvenience or death.

"I am Everard," he said, gesturing for her to follow him. "If you will come with me, I will escort you to the withdrawing room where my lord will join you shortly."

She glanced after Lyrarn just as he stepped into the stairwell. What interest did Rahmyr have in this man?

And was the man she hunted hidden somewhere within this castle?

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