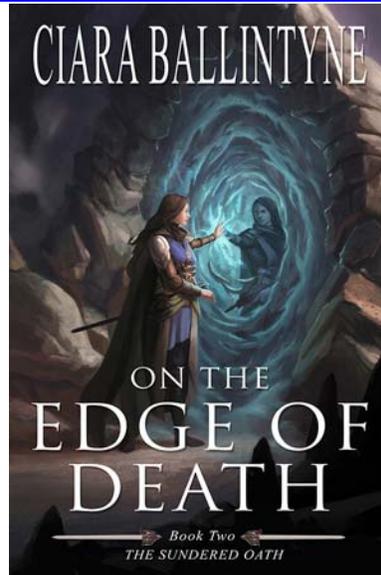


ON THE EDGE OF DEATH



By  
Ciara Ballintyne

\*\*\*SPECIAL 5-CHAPTER PREVIEW\*\*\*

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**ON THE EDGE OF DEATH**

**Book 2 of The Sundered Oath**

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

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

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## *Dedication*

*For my dragon ladies, Dionne Lister and MJ Kaufmann – you are the core of my writing network. The first to celebrate my successes, the first to offer your support, the first to hear of a new plot twist, the first to try and solve a problem with a scene that isn't working, and the first to listen to my editing woes. Without you, none of these books would be possible. You keep me writing when nothing else can. This one is for you.*

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## chapter 1

### Blood in the Water

A Battle Priestess of the death goddess isn't supposed to have friends, family or lovers, and Ellaeva was learning first-hand why not.

Blood ran over the ravine's stone floor, flooding the tiny stream and distorting the dark reflection of the forest canopy. She skidded down the rocky slope, shale slipping beneath her feet and almost sending her tumbling head over heels. Rocks bounced and clattered down around her.

She followed the tinkling, blood-red stream into a grove of trees. The wind whispered through the leaves, murmuring sweet nothings, and the air was thick with damp and mould.

In the dark heart of the grove a woman lay face down on the bank, her lower body in the water. Three arrows jutted from her back.

Another one. *Please, Ahura, why can't you have mercy on your priestesses?* But as had been the case for six months, the goddess did not answer her.

For two weeks now, priestesses of Ahura, the goddess of death, truth and justice, had been fleeing across the border from Jerrek into Velena, most of them wounded. All had haunted eyes in frightened faces, and every last one of them had lost someone, or seen another woman slaughtered out of hand. Many, like this one, had fled across the border at random points, afraid to pass through the official border crossing.

The woman inhaled with a harsh, rattling sound, and Ellaeva flung herself to her knees beside her. She thrust one hand hard against the wound below the woman's collarbone to try to staunch the bleeding. Sticky redness slicked her hands to the wrist. She tore two lengths of cloth from the bottom of her robe with sharp jerks, and pressed them against the woman's back.

Holding the crudely wadded bandages in place, she tried to roll the woman over. The stream water had soaked the priestess's robes, and in the end Ellaeva bunched fistfuls of cloth in her hands and hauled the woman on to her side. Cold water splashed up, dampening her own robes and chilling her skin.

At sight of the woman's tattooed face, Ellaeva's breath caught. Oriella.

She'd last seen her friend two weeks ago, when the border guard's spear had slammed to

the ground between them, blocking Ellaeva's path. The shaft was splintered and in need of oiling, and the foot-long spear point threatened gangrene more than anything else, but it had been sound enough to bar her way. After a quick, apologetic inspection of Ahura's holy blade, the guards had turned her back. Though they certainly looked uncomfortable about it, their message was clear: the Battle Priestess of Ahura was not welcome in Jerrek. Ordinarily she could rely on the word of law to gain her admittance almost anywhere, but it seemed Jerrek had turned away from the law.

It had astonished her. To deny Ahura's Battle Priestess was to deny truth and justice. That took guts, or a great deal of fear of something worse than Ciotach an Bhais.

The border guards reeked of fear, so much it almost made her sick.

Oriella had continued into the kingdom, following the lead they had on Ellaeva's parents. Thought dead for almost twenty years and only recently discovered to be alive, the trail was cold, but they had so few other leads that Oriella had refused to give up the one viable possibility they had. Now Ellaeva cursed her friend's decision bitterly – not that Oriella, on the other side of the border and out of reach, had given her any say in it.

Oriella's eyelids fluttered in her tattooed face, her lips trying to form words.

How long had she been lying here? Too long. Too much blood stained the rocks. *So much that she is beyond saving.*

But Ellaeva's thoughts scuttled away from that fact as she packed more improvised bandages around the arrow shaft. When she tugged on it gently, it didn't move. Lodged in a bone, or perhaps even in a lung. She shivered at the memory of her own arrow wound some six months earlier, and the difficulty of its removal. Her back still ached on occasion. Then she steeled herself and gripped the next shaft.

"Stop." The word was a mere breath of air on Oriella's lips, and she fumbled for Ellaeva's hand. "Stop. I am... dying."

"No," Ellaeva whispered. A sickening, cold feeling weighed heavy in her stomach. She settled back onto her heels, heedless of the blood and water soaking her black robes, and pushed loose wisps of dark hair away from her face. Her hand left a sticky streak down one cheek.

Oriella's gaze met hers, her eyes glazed with pain. "We both... know it."

Her chest constricted, and she gulped in a lungful of the evening air. It burned cold down her throat. "No. I won't let you."

"The goddess has already... stayed her hand once... for you. Think she'll... do it again?" A wry smile twisted Oriella's lips for a moment before fading. Her breath came in shallow, laboured gasps.

Ellaeva's back grew rigid. Ahura had returned someone from the grave at her request once already; she would not do it again. Despite that, or perhaps because of it, Ellaeva went back to her task, packing more cloth around the wound. The second shaft twirled freely between her fingers, the green feathers flashing in the dim light, though Oriella grunted. If she could get one out and bind the wound properly...

"Stop. Just stop, Ellaeva." Oriella's voice was a hoarse, pained whisper.

Ellaeva did as the priestess bade her, but in her mind's eye she saw only the memory of a darkened tent, where the red-headed man lay dead before her. The same desperation as then coursed through her. She could not, simply *could not*, face that moment again.

Once more she called for Ahura. Once more, only a vast silence echoed in her head. That night, when Ahura had agreed to restore Lyrām Aharris to life, had been the last night the goddess ever spoke to her.

"I have *seen* it. You cannot save me." Oriella seized her hand.

Seen it. The words fell heavily in the peaceful silence beneath the trees. If Oriella had been given knowledge of the moment of her death, then nothing Ellaeva did could avert it. All Ahura's priestesses knew the moment of their death. All except Ellaeva. A Battle Priestess had little enough hope as it was without foreseeing the precise moment of her demise.

"Here, in my robes..." Oriella fumbled at the black cloth a moment, before letting her hand fall feebly.

Ellaeva peeled back the sodden fabric, finding a wet, rolled parchment stained heavily with blood in a pocket.

Oriella nodded as Ellaeva lifted the parchment free. Blue tinged the edges of her lips. "I... kept notes."

Ellaeva glanced down at the scrolled parchment, and when she looked up again, Oriella's eyes had slid shut. With a wordless cry, she dropped the parchment and grabbed her friend's hand. Her heart still beat, but her pulse beneath Ellaeva's fingers was thready and erratic.

The very idea of Oriella's death was incomprehensible. She was the only person to have shown her any care in recent years, the only one except... except Lyrām.

She still sensed him, nestled in the back of her head, though he was too far distant for her to know anything of him except his direction. It was better this way, and she'd been grateful when her parents' trail had pulled her halfway across the continent, away from Ahlleyn and Lyrām Aharris.

When Oriella had offered to accompany her from Caisteal Aingeal, offered to serve as her companion priestess, it was a gift from Ahura—a blessing to have company, and a friend to help her shoulder the burden, especially since the fire of her hate for the Rahmyrrim had dimmed after she discovered her parents were alive. And now, Oriella was dying.

Though an empty ache filled her heart, the tears would not come—only bitter anger. It filled her until she sagged to the cold stones, quivering.

The scroll was wet with Oriella's blood and water from the stream. She unrolled it with great care, grimacing. Great swathes of words had been obliterated, washed out by water or lost beneath red stains. So few words of the original page of text remained, tantalising with meaning beyond comprehension, but she could make out the first part:

*... her parents ... found them in Ellair but they are ... kept well-guarded ... Sense of great unease and unrest ... new gods.*

Her heart leapt into mouth. Oriella had *found* them. Against all hope and expectation, despite fear she would find only another cold trail, Oriella had found her parents.

Oriella clutched at her hand. Ellaeva surged erect, grasping her in return, but her friend was still unconscious, her body responding to reflex in its moment of extremity. Her body went rigid, and then fell limp.

Ellaeva pressed her fingers against her wrist. A pulse, faint and erratic, fluttered one last time, like a frantic butterfly caught in the hand. Then it stopped, and did not beat again.

She stared at Oriella's slack features, her friend's fingers still limp in her palm. Her head spun, and she teetered on the brink of vomiting, but then the dizziness faded away. Very carefully, she laid the hand on the dead priestess's breast. With two fingers, she touched her brow, lips and breast, representing each function of life ceasing in death.

And still the tears would not come, but a pounding began in her ears.

As she climbed to her feet, the calm peace of the stream beneath the trees struck her with an almost visceral pain. Birds sang somewhere nearby, and she ground her teeth.

She had to breach Jerrek's borders, had to find her parents, and had to discover who was

responsible for the death of Oriella and the other priestesses. The few legible words on the scroll were so far apart that she could not decipher their meaning, but the reference to new gods, especially in conjunction with the murder of Ahura's devoted, made her skin prickle with gooseflesh. And her parents were somewhere in there?

*And what if I find them? What then? We all play happy families?*

She shied away from the thought. What did you do when you reunited with parents you hadn't seen for nearly twenty years? Even for ordinary people, it would be a challenge. What then, when the daughter was Ciotach an Bhais?

The more important question was how she would get into Jerrek. The border guards had recognised her sword before her face, but if they hadn't known what she looked like before then, they certainly did now. She might have tried crossing elsewhere or between checkpoints, but it seemed foolhardy in the extreme to assume her description would not be circulated.

She could return with a company of valkyrs and try to force her way across the border and into Ellair, the capital, but how many would die? And whoever was behind the attack on Ahura would have ample warning to flee. In the chaos, her parents might disappear again. And whatever was happening in Jerrek could be covered up. She'd never know who killed Oriella.

Her chest squeezed painfully tight, and her eyes dropped to the dead woman again, then jerked away like a hand brushing a hot stove.

She would have justice for Oriella, and she would find her parents. And she would find out what was happening in Jerrek.

Though the borders were closed to Ahura's chosen, a king's diplomatic delegation might still gain admittance.... Almost involuntarily, she turned to the west, following the invisible line connecting her to Ahlleyn.

Her fingers curled closed around the hilt of her sword, clenching so tight her knuckles ached. Ahlleyn was nowhere she wanted to go, but some things were more important than personal pain.



## chapter 2

### What I Want

Lynam leaned on the window casement, scouring the bustling courtyard of the royal palace of Ahlleyn below. Servants in the black and purple livery of the clan Gaylbrath strode confidently about their tasks, and his gaze skipped over them, looking for someone obviously out of place – looking for the crow amongst the sparrows. From this high, picking individual faces out of the crowd was impossible, but that didn't stop him searching. He didn't need a face to find the person he sought.

Despite his failure to note anyone out of place, he knew there was at least *one* person in the palace who shouldn't be there. He could feel it in his bones.

"Lynam, you're not listening to me."

Sighing, he turned, leaning back against the wall with his arms folded over his plaid. He regarded the duchess. "No, Narrawen, I'm not. I do apologise. What were you saying?"

The Duchess of Kinrothen narrowed pale-blue eyes at him. She stood in the centre of his sitting room, an inner sanctum furnished by his late wife, and a place of solitude and reflection where he'd usually not permit the duchess. But, short of his bedchamber, this was the only room in his suite with a window. He needed to see the courtyard, and she'd insisted on speaking with him.

"Never mind. You clearly have something else on your mind." Then her voice grew teasing. "Perhaps something I could help with?"

Lynam swallowed a long-suffering sigh. Narrawen, standing with her head cocked and one hand on a hip, was a fine figure of a woman, but she was also a schemer. Her kirtle, though made of expensive linen, was woven in the red, yellow and green tartan of her clan; she took every opportunity to wear it, as though reminding everyone she was their clan leader. Though women were accepted as equals in Ahlleyn, a woman heading a large warrior clan could experience certain... troublesome elements, and she carried a bow slung over her shoulder. A woman who would lead warriors must be a warrior, and she had the temperament to match the flaming red hair tumbling down her shoulders in unruly curls. Everything she did was calculated and planned, and there was no way he'd be sharing what was on his mind.

"It's nothing to trouble yourself over," he said.

"Oh, it would be no trouble to take a burden from your shoulders." She stepped forward, closing the distance between them to place a hand on his arm.

The heady aroma of eastern tuberose assaulted his nostrils, rich and sensual. She was tall, the top of her head on a level with his nose, and her breath tickled his clean-shaven chin. Her gaze held the resolute intensity of a woman accustomed to getting her way, sooner or later. She *was* beautiful, and in a way that went beyond her face and figure: she was fierce, determined, and intelligent.

But when he looked at her, he saw only Ellaeva.

Her brow pinched, as if reading something in his face, and he smoothed his expression.

"You've been too long a widower," she said.

He started. "Eighteen months! That's hardly too long."

She met his gaze with an intense expression, ignoring his protest. "And I've never married. We both need heirs."

He shook his head and tried to draw away, but she had him pinned between her wide skirts and the window. "You would merge two of the kingdom's most powerful and influential duchies into one? The aristocracy will never stand for it. You already know my answer, Narrawen. I'm not interested in marrying – you or anyone else. It's not personal, you understand?"

She snorted in a most unladylike fashion and tossed her hair, like a wild horse tossing its mane. "You pay too little attention, Lyrarn. You'd be surprised what the aristocracy will allow now, after the fall of Traeburhn. Everyone's been made nervous by his treason, especially when the king posthumously stripped him of his lands and titles. Besides, we need not merge the duchies. We could agree on a division of heirs."

"The risk of civil war –"

She leaned closer, until only inches separated their faces. The heady smell of her perfume was almost intoxicating.

"There are any number of men in this kingdom, and without, who would marry me," she said. "Most for the wrong reasons. Few of them have my respect and admiration, but you do. What I need is a husband. What I want is you."

The door burst open, thumping against the wall.

Narrawen jumped back, her bow clattering against the side table. A faint blush stained her cheeks.

Lyrarn's pulse quickened. This was it, the moment he'd been waiting for.

Everard stood framed by the sitting room's doorway, his posture perfectly erect as he folded his hands neatly in front of his sporran. As always, he was clad in scrupulous court attire, his rank pinned to the shoulder of his white shirt and his kilt falling in perfect pleats. His thinning grey hair had been meticulously combed, and his wire-framed glasses perched precariously on his nose. He kept his face blank, but a small twitch beside his eye betrayed his displeasure at the duchess's presence. "Sir."

Though Everard's tone was even, Lyrarn read the tension and urgency in him. "I know, Everard. I'll come."

"A prior engagement, Lyrarn?" Narrawen said. "Whatever it is, reschedule it. We're not done."

Lyrarn opened his mouth to countermand the order – though she outranked him, how dare she presume to order his aide-de-camp?

But Everard's gaze flickered to her with that same inscrutability, and in his perfectly

deadpan aide's voice he said, "Is Your Grace still chasing a husband? Perchance I can suggest a better hunting ground."

Narrawen grew rigid, and Lyrarn suppressed a grin.

"The duchess and I can finish our conversation later," Lyrarn said. "I'll come, Everard."

"No, sir—" Everard blinked, jerking aside as though pinched, and Ellaeva stepped into the room.

The shock of seeing her thrilled through him, like the mixed pleasure of an unexpectedly warm spring day, tainted by fording a stream running with snowmelt. Though he'd felt her jump suddenly from the far east to well within Ahlleyrn borders several days ago, though he'd felt her drawing nearer by the day, he hadn't realised she was here, outside the room. And no amount of time could have prepared him for this moment.

Their gazes locked. Her black eyes were flat and cold. In his head, the sense of her abruptly clenched into the hard glass ball that said she was trying to control or hide her feelings. That connection was the unintended legacy of his resurrection at her hand, but she'd grown better at controlling it. Then her gaze flickered to Narrawen, standing so close alongside him, and the glass ball shattered into a thousand shards with an impact so visceral he gasped and sat down. The chill in the air deepened.

She switched her stare back to Lyrarn. Finally she spoke, in a voice cold as iron. "I have come to see Alagondar."



Lyrarn sat in one of the formal chairs in the king's private reception chamber and stared vacantly at the small fire that crackled on the hearth against the deepening cold of an Ahlleyrn autumn. The chair was timber, and uncomfortable, despite the velvet purple upholstery on the padded seat. The smoky scent of burning peat filled the room.

Ellaeva stood on the opposite side of the room, fingering her sword hilt and staring at the portrait of some ancestor or other of the king as though studying it in minute detail.

The room seemed vast and empty, with two lines of unoccupied chairs against either wall bracketing the rug that ran down the centre of the stone floor. The silence between them stretched uncomfortably. Of all the things he'd thought she might say at the sight of him after six months of separation, 'I have come to see Alagondar' had most definitely not been on his list.

She stood at parade rest, having declined a seat with her usual stiff-necked pride, and he couldn't help but drink in the sight of her, grim visage and all. Ahura's holy blade still hung on her hip, and in every other way she looked exactly as he recalled: black hair swept back tight from her brow into a warrior's tail, and her black eyes flat and expressionless in a face pale and lovely as marble. Her lips had that grim, hard line he recalled from their first meeting in Caisteal Aingeal, without any of the wry humour he'd wrung from her later in the siege, and her eyes were red-rimmed. From sleeplessness, perhaps?

She'd volunteered nothing in the way of small talk, nor enquired after his well-being. He toyed with the fringe on the seat cushion. He had no idea what to say to her.

Still, he should try. "Have you... uh—"

The inner door swung open on silent hinges, and she pivoted smoothly on the balls of her feet.

The king stepped into the room, pulling the panel shut without admitting any attendants or advisers.

Lynam, surprised that the king was alone, lifted an eyebrow, then belatedly scrambled to his feet to offer a bow.

A small smile quirked the king's lips; Alagondar was a deft hand at reading Lynam's moods. "If the Battle Priestess of Ahura wishes to speak to me, Aharris, I expect it's a rather dire matter of urgency and perhaps not something immediately shared with my wider advisers. I expect you, as my military adviser, will do for now." Alagondar waved him back down, and took a seat several chairs down from Lynam, across from the fireplace where Ellaeva stood.

"Your Majesty." Ellaeva inclined her head and made no move to sit. "You are most wise."

Alagondar inclined his head in return and offered no comment on her minimal courtesies. Ahura's priestesses were the arbiters of justice in all the kingdoms, but it was her Battle Priestess who acted as the supreme court and dispensed justice in a most final way. It was the Battle Priestess who had authority in matters of law and judgement, even over the governments of each land. When a king or queen needed to be held to account, it was Ellaeva who would have the reckoning. And that was why she still wore the sword, even in the presence of an unguarded king.

"We did not talk much when last we met, Your Holiness," Alagondar said. "But Lynam has spoken well of you since you left us at Caisteal Aingeal six months past. Perhaps *too* well."

When the king cast a sharp eye at Lynam, he caught and held his gaze unflinching. If he had sung Ellaeva's praises... well, she deserved it. She made even Narrawen look like a shrinking violet.

*Narrawen would buckle under the weight on Ellaeva's shoulders; Ciotach an Bhais goes to her doom unflinching.* No sooner did he think it than he wished he hadn't. The future of a Battle Priestess was dark to start with; how much worse had their forbidden night together made her burden? And yet, the almost physical ache to hold her again was almost impossible to resist, even knowing that to do so would be to cross a god.

"Then I hope that praise will sway Your Majesty to listen to my plea." Ellaeva swept her robes forward and finally sat, perching on the edge of a seat with a stiff posture, probably to accommodate the cuir bouilli plate she wore underneath. "Something dire is underway in Jerrek. They are killing the priestesses."

Lynam jerked as though slapped, and even Alagondar sucked in a sharp breath.

"Killing *priestesses*?" Lynam couldn't keep the horror from his voice. Not only was it murder, but to kill the representatives of justice was to embrace injustice.

"I only have second-hand reports." Ellaeva leaned forward. "I was refused entry at the border, but my sisters are fleeing, many injured, and carrying tales of priestesses killed and driven out."

"They refused *you*?" Lynam closed his hands on the arms of his chair.

"I have had my own reports." The king's voice was quieter and more thoughtful than Lynam's. "The kingdom appears to be regressing into an earlier form of Jerreki barbarity. Many women traders have fled the country, following a ban on women being involved in commercial matters. Apparently all the highest-ranked women have withdrawn into seclusion—permanently. These are the customs of last century. Are they burning the courts?"

Lynam looked sharply at Alagondar. Ahlleyn shared only a short border with Jerrek, and those borderlands were far from the control of the Jerreki capital, Ellair, but when a kingdom starts burning its courts of justice, its neighbours had best arm their men.

"I've heard conflicting reports. The main temple had not been attacked when I left the border, but some of the smaller altars of worship had been closed or destroyed."

Alagondar nodded. "One of the old customs was that women could not testify in court, so

presumably they cannot serve as magistrates either. The courts are an obvious target.”

“They specifically barred me from entry, but allowed my friend, a priestess of Ahura, though. She barely made it out again.... Ahura’s followers are being attacked, and there is talk of new gods, though which ones it is not clear. She died for this information.”

Her voice was flat and cold, but Lyrām grunted at the sudden stab of pain rolling down the link between them. The link that bound him to her, and to her requests. He’d not thought to ask her what that *binding* really meant. He’d been too caught up in the euphoria of their breaking the siege and then in the heartache of her departure.

Alagondar sat back in his chair, his hands gripping the armrests and his face regal but blank, betraying nothing of his thoughts or intentions. “I can see this is a matter of concern for the Temple. Perhaps all of them, if this heresy spreads to the other sects. I wonder at their intentions if they shut down the arbiters of justice... Is it that they want no lawful witnesses to some atrocity against their own people, or even mine? But it is too early for me to do more than watch and bolster the border defences, so what I don’t know is why you are here. Presumably not to warn me—I have my own sources. Is it information you seek?”

“What I want,” she said, “is Lyrām.”

Hearing his name on her lips sent a shiver of pleasure down Lyrām’s spine, but the look she gave him carried not an iota of warmth. He tensed in his chair, waiting for more.

“I need a way into Jerrek to investigate. Send Lyrām to Jerrek on a diplomatic mission. I don’t care what he’s there to negotiate—make it real if it suits you, or a sham if there is nothing you want of them. Perhaps a border agreement, or something else it makes sense for your military adviser to deal with personally.”

Alagondar cast a glance between Ellaeva and Lyrām. No doubt he’d noticed the familiarity with which she used Lyrām’s name.

“Why Aharris? I might be inclined to aid the Temple in this matter and help you across the border, but I would not ordinarily send Aharris to negotiate anything.”

Lyrām tensed. He couldn’t decide whether he wanted Alagondar to refuse her or to grant her request. Her absence had hurt, but her presence had the potential to hurt more. And of course, there were the secrets between them. He’d never told Alagondar that he’d died and been saved only through Ellaeva’s intervention, and Ahura’s mercy. He’d never told *anyone* that, nor what his resurrection entailed: that he was bound to serve Ahura’s Battle Priestess.

“Lyrām is... bound to me,” she said, speaking slowly as though picking her words carefully. “There is a debt. And I need someone I can trust to watch my back.”

“Then,” the king said softly, “it is not my help you require so much as Aharris’s. What if I said no?”

The skin around Ellaeva’s eyes tightened, though not a muscle shifted otherwise, and when she spoke, her voice was cold enough to raise frost. “The nature of the bond allows me to compel him, will ye, nil ye. But if it is your intention to refuse my request, Your Majesty, then I request that you speak plainly and simply say so!”

She lurched to her feet, staring the king down with the expression of a monarch considering a declaration of war. The righteous anger made her face both beautiful and terrible.

Lyrām sat back in his seat. Compel him? In a literal sense? He hunched his shoulders at the thought. Then a sudden flush of heat rushed through him, dispelling the chill fingers of fear that brushed him at the realisation she might have dominion over him. If she insisted on taking him against Alagondar’s wishes, then it wasn’t an Ahlleyn diplomatic mission she wanted at all, but just him. She had betrayed something in this outburst. Despite her cold front, she did want him, she did miss him.

Was the ache he felt his own or hers?

“Peace.” Alagondar desultorily waved her back to her seat with a thick-knuckled hand. “I am not really considering refusing you, but I like to know what the stakes are. High, I presume, if you would risk angering a crowned king for the company of one man. Ahlleyn risks much if this goes badly and it becomes known that we aided you in full knowledge and of our own free will.”

Ellaeva sat down, her eyes suddenly unfocussed and staring into the distance. “It is not the other kingdoms’ wrath you must fear, I suspect. It is the dark gods.”



### chapter 3

## What I Cannot Have

Lynam hurried to catch up to Ellaeva as she strode away from the king's suite, his formal kilt and plaid flapping in his haste. Once dismissed from the king's presence she was, as ever, rushing on without pause to whatever task she had next on her list.

In the end, Alagondar had given her what she wanted. The words 'dark gods' had a galvanising effect when dropped from the lips of Ahura's Battle Priestess. The day she spoke those words to Lynam in Caisteal Aingeal still rang stark in the halls of his memory, like a bell tolling for death. Little was known about most of the dark gods, beyond ancient and twisted references in nursery rhymes and folk songs, but that almost made it worse – like one's childhood demons had turned out to be real after all.

He panted breathlessly as they emerged from a twisting turnpike stair into a lower level. "Are you ever going to stop and talk to me?" The rolling echoes of their boot heels on timber floors almost swallowed his words.

She stopped and wheeled about so abruptly in the half-lit gloom of the royal castle's interior that he almost ploughed right into her. The smell of leather and polished steel surrounded her in a cloud, a scent somehow more intoxicating than Narrawen's exotic eastern perfume. Candles flickered on the walls, but the only windows were arrow-slits, leaving her face partially in shadow. Her feelings turned to a glass bubble in his head, and though he poked and prodded it with mental fingers, she kept him out.

"Do you not think we will have plenty of time to talk on the way to Jerrek?"

"Not in private," he said, his voice soft.

A servant scurried past, her eyes downcast but peeking furtively as she walked. Ellaeva naturally drew eyes, not only because of the stark robes signifying a priestess of Ahura or the way she stood – so erect and with an aura of confidence bordering on arrogance – but because of the sword. On the hip of a priestess of Ahura, a blade could only mean one thing: Ciotach an Bhais had come to the palace.

"You insisted on having me along." He jabbed a finger at her, then realised what he'd done and dropped it to rest on the hilt of his sword. "Not just anyone who could get you into Jerrek,

but me, personally.”

She sniffed and turned again, proceeding down the hall with a slightly less aggressive stride. “I meant what I said to your king: I need someone I can trust implicitly. I cannot take the valkyrs as they are too recognisable. There are only two others I trust. One is dead, and the other is you. But there is a reason I stayed away so long, Lyrām Aharris. It is for that same reason that we have nothing to discuss now. What I want, I cannot have.”

The flat tone sent a shiver down his spine, reminding him of the thin line they trod, and her words on their last parting: *If we defy a god, we will surely lose.*

They’d managed it once, a forbidden, stolen night of passion, shared despair, and broken faith. But Ellaeva had clearly decided that thumbing her nose at the goddess once was enough.

And I should too.

He lapsed into silence as they entered another stairwell. They took it all the way to the ground floor, emerging adjacent to the western curtain wall in the courtyard. She struck out for the opposite building, dodging adroitly around the bustling servants and groomsmen, then paused to let a woman with a horse in hand pass by, its hooves ringing sharply against the stone cobbles. She ducked behind them, perilously close to the animal’s hindquarters. She appeared to be headed back towards his rooms.

Two soldiers approached, red cloth knotted about their biceps. The woman faltered at sight of Ellaeva, nudged her companion, and then both stopped and saluted.

Ellaeva nodded to them, then turned to raise a quizzical eyebrow at Lyrām.

“They’ve not forgotten you,” he said. “The soldiers who rode out with you at Caisteal Aingeal, they’ll be yours for life.”

Her cheeks turned pink in the moment before she turned away.

“Do you have a plan?” he said as they entered the building housing his quarters.

At the same moment, she said, “How are you and Drault?”

He missed a step, almost tripping on the narrow risers, and forgot his own question. His jaw ached from clenching his teeth so hard. Drault, the man who had him caught on the twin horns of obligation, unable to keep one without abandoning the other. Lyrām had sworn vengeance for his wife’s murder, only to discover that the crown prince was to blame and that keeping his vow to Zaheva meant treason. Drault’s blackmail, threatening to frame Lyrām for the murder, kept him from appealing to the king for justice. Lyrām had no proof, after all, only the testimony of the dead traitor Chancellor Traeburhn, who’d been complicit in the whole plot.

They had emerged onto his floor, into another hall lit only by candles, before he found the words to answer her.

“Nothing has changed,” he said, and meant it. Drault was still an arrogant, detestable arsehole, Zaheva was still dead, and he was still bound by obligation. And Drault still held his blackmail threat over his head. Even a fleeting glimpse of the prince was enough to ruin a good day, and days when duty forced him into the prince’s company for extended periods were an interminable horror. “How have *you* been?”

She shrugged without looking at him, but her step faltered a fraction. “As well as can be expected for a Battle Priestess of Ahura. When I left Caisteal Aingeal, I travelled to Tembra to try and find my parents, then had to go to Mysena to hunt down a Rahmyrrim. Two hundred years old, and he looked no older than you.”

“Service for a dark god must have *some* advantages,” Lyrām said. “Otherwise, why do it?”

A pensive frown twisted her lips, but she said nothing.

“Did you find you parents?”

She twitched, one hand on the handle of his brass-bound door. “I think they might be in

Jerrek.”

Then she opened the door, stepping inside, and leaving him dumbfounded on the threshold.

As they entered Lyram’s sitting room, Everard rose smoothly and executed a bow in Ellaeva’s direction. Though his face was faultlessly calm, his unhappiness was evident in his over-stiff posture. When he straightened, a frown pinched his brow.

This was Lyram’s private sanctum, one rigorously guarded by Everard. Few came here, and the room was still sumptuously and comfortably appointed by Zaheva’s hand, intended as a safe place for her husband to relax and unwind away from the eyes of the court. The broad windows were on the interior side of the building, facing the courtyard rather than out over the fortifications, and so didn’t compromise the castle’s defensiveness.

Ellaeva unbuckled her baldric, propped the holy blade against a wall, and sank into a comfortably overstuffed chair.

Everard, at a gesture from Lyram, subsided into a chair with faint mutters. The afternoon was late and the light in the room was fading, but there was enough thin warmth in the autumn sun for Lyram to take the seat on the window casement and savour it.

“I have a plan,” she said. “We, and I suppose you, too, Everard, must leave here with whatever functionaries and guards a diplomatic mission headed by someone of your rank would usually require. Jerrek and Ahlleyn are not enemies, and they should let us across the border without fuss if we announce ourselves as a delegation from the King of Ahlleyn. Banners flying, plenty of pomp, that sort of thing. Whatever it is they are hiding, they would quickly attract the attention of every state on this continent if they started closing the borders to peaceful diplomatic missions from neutral bordering kingdoms.”

“You can’t go like that.” Everard waved a hand at her priestess’s garb. His words were blunt but his tone, as always, was perfectly courteous.

Lyram sighed and rolled his eyes. Everard and Ellaeva had a history of tension, mostly driven by Everard’s conviction that she was bound to get him in trouble. *Is he wrong?*

“I know.” Ellaeva stood and pulled her robes over her head in a smooth motion.

Everard choked, but Lyram merely leaned back in his chair. He already knew what Ciotach an Bhais wore under her robes, and it was perfectly decent.

She tossed the bundle of black cloth aside and stood before them in a combination of cuir bouilli and iron plate that would suit a moderately well-off mercenary or noble’s guard.

Lyram’s mouth dried. He’d forgotten just how much those robes hid.

“Will this do?”

He tried to moisten his tongue, then nodded. “You’ll be going as, what, a guard?”

“Have you replaced Galdron?”

Everard stiffened, and Lyram’s fingers curled hard around the arms of his chair.

“No.” His voice came out a croak. Six months on and Galdron’s death still stung. Too many had died at Caisteal Aingeal, too many who would still be alive but for the machinations of the Rahmyrrim and Ellaeva. And now, what? Was he going to do it all over again in Jerrek?

The door opened, and the last man Lyram ever wanted to see again stepped in with a sneer on his lips.

“I hear you’re going to Jerrek, Aharris.” Drault struck a pose in the still open doorway, his hands on his hips as he stared down Lyram. His hair was unusually dark for an Ahlleyn, being so dark an auburn as to appear almost black except in the sun, and his green eyes scoured the room with contempt. “I’ll be coming with you.”

Lyram stared at him blankly, unable to muster a response. Surely the king had not—Surely

he knew his son couldn't be trusted with this kind of knowledge? His stomach curdled at the thought of months in the prince's close company... in the company of the man who raped his wife and cut her throat. He forced himself to speak. "I'm not convinced that's wise, Your Highness."

"But my father is just dying for me to come along." The prince smirked, and then his gaze lit on Ellaeva, standing in the centre of the room. "Who is this, then? A suitor, Aharris?"

Lynam clenched the chair's arms again, but Ellaeva stepped smoothly into the awkward silence and executed a bow. It was a cursory bow, to be sure, but recognisably a bow.

"Your Highness," she murmured. "I am the new captain of the guard."

Lynam jerked at her audacity – she'd taken the decision completely and irrevocably out of his hands – but Drault appeared equally surprised.

Lynam closed his mouth before the prince could notice. Drault didn't know. Likely he only knew the cover story and intended to shoulder his way into the journey on principle, his usual one being that Lynam couldn't have any glory unless he could share in it. He'd been that way since the Siege of Invergahr, as if he could somehow scrub from national memory the fact that he had blubbered in a ruined tower while Lynam won the battle against insurmountable odds.

"A woman captain," Drault said, glancing at Lynam. "For all that you take on women soldiers so freely, I never thought you'd allow one so much power in your guard."

Another time, the comment would have made Lynam bristle, but his gaze had just fallen on Ellaeva's robe near her feet. Her sword still stood propped against the wall, mostly out of sight, but Drault was worldly enough that he *might* connect one woman warrior and a bundle of black robes together.

There was no way Lynam could move the bundle without drawing attention to it, since Ellaeva stood between him and the garment.

"That's Captain Ellie Decourt, not woman," he said. There were many Ellies in Tembra, where the snowdrop flower inspired the name of many a fair-skinned farmer's daughter, though it was considered too common by the nobility. Decourt was Velenese, but nothing in Ellaeva's features precluded mixed heritage. "And you'd not be so quick to scoff at a woman captain if Narrawen was present."

"Narrawen *is* present," her clear voice said from behind Drault.

Drault half-turned, revealing the duchess standing in the doorway with her bow over her shoulder and a look of extreme displeasure on her face.

Lynam grimaced. Was *everyone* just going to let themselves into his sitting room uninvited?

In that moment, Everard stood, stepped to Ellaeva's side, and discreetly kicked the robe under a chair as he took her arm. "I should show the captain to her new quarters."

"A new captain?" Narrawen raised her eyebrows and took in Ellaeva from top to toe. "Most timely for your trip to Jerrek."

Lynam clenched his jaw. So she'd heard the news, *and* she'd been present when Ellaeva arrived. Narrawen knew enough to ruin it all.

"A political journey," he said, folding his arms, "and one I'd rather not take."

Drault backed into the room, as though he didn't want to be caught between them. He bumped against chair, which jostled Ellaeva's sword. It fell to the floor with a rattle, drawing every eye.

Casually, Ellaeva stooped to retrieve it. She carefully covered her sword hilt with her left hand.

"Perhaps then," the duchess said, favouring him with a bright smile, "my company will make it all the more pleasurable."

A muscle in Lyrām's cheek jumped spasmodically and he ground his teeth. First Drault and now Narrawen. Well, he could not gainsay the prince, although he *would* appeal to Alagondar, for what good it might do him, but by Ahura's blade, he *could* stop Narrawen. "You'll do no such thing. We have reports of some upheaval in the region. I'm not convinced we should be risking His Highness, but we'll certainly not be risking the stability of a duchy at the same time."

She gave him a wide-eyed look, still standing in the doorway and blocking Everard and Ellaeva's departure, and her eyes flickered significantly to the priestess. "Surely you wouldn't force me to stay here, consigned to no more excitement than to *gossip* about your mission and your companions."

And that simply, she had him. His shoulders slumped. Either he brought her along, or she'd reveal Ellaeva's identity. The more who knew the truth, the greater the risk someone would slip up at the border or inside Jerrek, and he certainly couldn't risk Drault finding out.

"Why do you even want to come?"

Narrawen stepped closer, touching his cheek with one gloved hand. "Lyrām, dear, if I keep letting you run away from me, I'll never get you to marry me."



Ellaeva sat in a chair carefully positioned in the early morning light streaming through the windows, to better allow the frictionnaire to see her face.

"I don't see how we can even get away with this." Lyrām watched them from alongside the sitting room fireplace, toying with the small row of framed miniatures. "Drault and Narrawen saw you only yesterday. They *know* what you look like. I can maybe explain the situation to Narrawen and secure her assistance, but Drault? Never."

"The difference will be subtle," Melleph said, using no honorifics in the way of all her kind. "The differences will not be so great that he will think anything of it—just details overlooked in a first meeting. But they will be significant enough that she won't match a description of her own self."

The whipcord lean, white-haired frictionnaire was leaning over her to attend her task. Ellaeva glanced back out the window to watch the servants hurrying around in the courtyard below. There were a great many preparations required for a diplomatic mission, especially one that included the Prince of Ahlleyn, and the group were scheduled to depart on the morrow.

Melleph stepped back, folding her hands before her.

Ellaeva glanced up into the pale woman's silver eyes, slit vertically like a cat's. What had the frictionnaire looked like before she sought out magic? She was tall enough to be Mysenan, although nothing of that people's darkness remained to her if so.

The frictionnaire began gently to run two fingers together. It was a common habit of her kind, to constantly generate friction of some kind, so that they always had access to the energy that fuelled their magic.

"It can't be that powerful a spell," Lyrām said.

Ellaeva shot him a look—this was hardly the time to interrupt a frictionnaire intent on her craft—but Melleph answered in an absent voice.

"It is powerful enough. I will attach it to her bones and her muscles, so it will keep the same fundamental structure, altering and mimicking while following her expression."

Her accent had the cadence common to all graduates of Tyrandell, though there was a hint of something else below. Yes, it could be Mysenan.

"No, I meant..." Lyrām rubbed his own fingers together in demonstration.

He was right. Only a very small amount of friction, and so a small amount of power, could be generated by a frictionnaire merely rubbing her fingers in that way.

The frictionnaire looked up, a mocking smile twisting her lips. "There is adequate friction in the room to power the spell."

Ellaeva's gaze snapped up to meet Lyrām's, and he glanced away. A slow, hot flush crept up his cheeks.

She looked back out the window and stared fixedly. *Enough friction.* If that weren't the truth, she didn't know what was. At least the frictionnaire couldn't know the *cause* of the tension. The memory of Narrawen's casual reference to marrying Lyrām popped back into her head, and she held herself still only through an exertion of will. *I cannot have him. I must accept that, wish him the best, and move on.* And yet the idea of him marrying lit a deep ache in her belly.

"It is done." The frictionnaire stopped rubbing her fingers together and lowered her hand.

Ellaeva touched her face, but it didn't feel any different. She glanced at her sword, propped against a nearby table. The frictionnaire had worked her magic on the weapon first, and now it appeared a standard broadsword, with a battered basket hilt. A red tassel hung from its end, and the basket was tarnished brass. Its transformation was nothing short of extreme, and it now bore no resemblance whatsoever to the blade of the Battle Priestess, or Lyrām's own. What did she now look like? The makeover on her face needed to be more subtle, though, or so the frictionnaire said, because she was an animate, moving object.

Melleph stepped away, leaving Lyrām with an unobstructed view.

Ellaeva watched him for some hint of the change the magic had wrought.

"She doesn't look any different."

The frictionnaire's eyes flickered, as if she'd thought to roll her eyes but then reconsidered. "Not to you, who know her well. It is a subtle spell. You see what you expect to see. Others, who know her less well, will not."

Ellaeva picked up a hand mirror lying on a nearby table and perused her image. She frowned, disappointed. As Lyrām had said, she didn't look any different. Her hair, pulled back in a horsetail, was still black. The stern look made her old beyond her years, and her black eyes still carried their customary chill. She didn't look like a woman of twenty-three, but she did still look like herself.

"An illusion like this needs to be subtle if it will last," Melleph said. "The illusion needs to move with your face, and the bigger the changes, the more energy it will draw, and the sooner natural attrition will show. Trust me, for longevity, this is what you need." The frictionnaire picked up her bag and headed for the door. "Good day."

As the door clicked shut behind her, Ellaeva met Lyrām's gaze. Immediately the tension in the room spiked. *Ahura, will it be this way the entire time?* They left tomorrow on a journey that would take weeks, followed by who knew how long in Jerrek.

"Will you marry Narrawen?" She broke eye contact. Why had she asked that? She hadn't meant to, and the words came out stiffer than she liked.

"No. I don't know. No."

She flicked her gaze back up to him for a moment, a tiny smile tugging the corners of her mouth despite herself. "Which is it?"

But he didn't smile, instead frowning deeply. "I need to marry and have heirs. And politically, she is a good match, but..."

"But?"

"But." He looked at her frankly.

A hot flush spread up her cheeks, and she found herself unable to drop her eyes. "We... we cannot be." Her tongue tripped over itself, betraying her.

"And yet," he said, his voice very quiet in the near silence of the room, "you still asked."



## chapter 4

### A Moment of Fear

Ellaeva smoothed out the worn piece of paper on the well-polished table, then glanced around the inn to make sure no one was near. This early in the evening, the well-furnished common room was still quiet, with only two locals nursing ale at separate tables. Tallow candles on the walls had been lit against the early autumn sunset, adding a dim glow and an acrid smell to the room.

After three weeks of hard travel through the highlands in almost constant rain, they would finally cross the border into Jerrek tomorrow. The cavalcade had stopped for the night in the small town of Reivere, an Ahleyn community heavily influenced by Velena across the eastern border rather than Jerrek across the northern. While the guards and servants camped in the tents, the inn had rooms enough to accommodate the nobles in the group and Ellaeva.

The paper before her bore a drawing of two faces, a man and a woman; her parents. A bad likenesses, no doubt. She'd created the original drawing from the almost twenty-year-old memory of a five-year old.

In the last six months, she'd expanded on that original picture after returning to her home village and then following her parents' cold trail. The further she traced them, the fresher people's memories grew, and the more she'd modified the drawings.

"Nice picture."

Ellaeva immediately snatched up the drawing, folding it and stuffing it away as she looked up into the oily smile of Drault. His breath stank as he leaned over and set two tankards of ale on the table; they weren't his first drinks of the evening. His dark red hair was pulled back in a neat queue, no doubt courtesy of the nervy man who served as his aide, and he was dressed far too finely for a back-country inn like this. The Gaylbrath tartan alone screamed his identity, and he wore both kilt and plaid with a snowy white silk shirt. Then again, she *had* said the more pomp the better.

She swallowed a grimace and dropped her eyes, unable to find it in herself to offer a smile. A man like Drault would only take it the wrong way anyway. "Your Highness."

The prince sat down uninvited, as princes tended to do, and pushed one of the tankards

towards her.

"I am waiting for Lyrām," she said.

"You speak very familiarly of your betters." He looked at her sideways over the top of his ale and took a long draught. When he set the tankard down, an unpleasant, amused smile twisted his lips.

She shouldn't have used Lyrām's name. That was a sloppy error. "I acknowledge it is inappropriate of me to speak so familiarly of him in public."

"Bit more to it than just captain and lord, eh?" Drault's smile turned sly as he leaned forward over the table. "The nights get cold in winter in Ahlleyn without someone to keep you warm."

Ellaeva curled her hands under the table to stop from punching him in the nose. It was already slightly crooked from when Lyrām had broken it, after Drault had insulted Lyrām's dead wife. That urge to hit him was, she realised, entirely understandable. She pushed the proffered tankard back to the centre of the table. "I've never endured an Ahlleyn winter. And I can I assure you there is no more to it."

Immediately the sly sneer disappeared and he reached across the table to take her left hand. His smile was now astonishingly genuine, even lighting his green eyes. "Then he won't mind if I cut in. You are breathtakingly beautiful, captain. Are you aware of that?"

The transformation was so unexpected that she hesitated, caught flat-footed by a flanking attack. Then she stood, pulling her gloved hand from his grasp.

He resisted for a moment, long enough that she thought he wouldn't let go.

"I was not aware that any claim by Lord Aharris would have stopped you, Your Highness. In any case, I am not interested."

The smile died, anger flickering in his eyes, but she turned her back on him and strode to the bar.

She probably shouldn't have taunted him like that, or alluded to his interest in Lyrām's dead wife. Did he suspect that Lyrām knew the truth?

The barkeep stood behind the scratched but well-cared for bar, polishing some pewter mugs. Unsurprisingly, he was a priest of Kelich; many tavernkeepers were, although there were some private alehouses. He wore unassuming brown robes, which a priest once told her was a good colour for hiding all the ale stains, and he had the coffee-coloured skin and dark hair of Mysena. His kind tended to move around a lot, trading places and generally making their way around the country via the various taverns which were the communal property of their Temple. He looked her up and down appraisingly, his eyes narrowed.

Ellaeva leaned on the bar, the leather in her armour creaking, and spread out the smudged picture of her parents. "Have you seen either of them?" she asked quickly, to distract him from wondering about her. Those truly close to their gods might sense something of the frictionnaire magic or her true nature, if given enough time to dwell on it. She only wanted him to know who she was if *she* chose to reveal it.

Her parents were not particularly memorable people, so she held out little hope anyone might recall them, even though it appeared she might have a strong resemblance to her mother. A priest of Kelich, though, was trained to notice comings and goings and events that a private tavernkeeper might turn a blind eye to. If anyone remembered them, it was most likely to be him.

He leaned closer without ceasing his polishing, wrinkled his nose, then shrugged. "Hard to say. Was a couple here about... say, three months ago now."

Her heart beat faster. "Tell me about them."

"Coulda been them. Or not. Only remember them because it was just after I took over here and they was right chatty about how some friend had got them jobs in the palace north of here. Unusual, them being foreigners and all."

She arched one eyebrow. Why did all roads lead to the palace? "The king's palace, you mean?"

"Indeed, he was going to work in the stables, and she in the kitchens. I thought it odd, Tembrans going deep into Jerrek. I saw Tembra once, stayed there for a whole two years. A fun, infectious people, notwithstanding Tembra is home to Ahura." He cocked his head at her, considering. "You look a bit more serious than the average Tembran, though. Generally speaking, Jerrek's not a fun place for a fun people like yours. They're a bit backwards up there, always have been, but lately things have been getting worse. It's like the old days in Jerrek, before they learned about the word 'civilisation'."

She straightened up, folding the picture up and tucking it away inside her armour. "What is going on there?"

"Nothing you want any involvement in, girl." The man flicked his rag up over his shoulder, set the mug down, and put his hands on his hips. "Not you nor any other woman. The way Jerrek is going, its women will be reduced to chattels within a few years."

Ellaeva glanced over her shoulder. The taproom was more or less empty, and only Drault was looking her way, scowling and nursing a mug of beer.

Turning back so her body concealed her hands from the room, she peeled back the black leather of her glove far enough for the priest to see. To his credit, his expression didn't change except for a pursing of his lips.

"Wondered when you were coming by," he said. "What with all them priestesses..."

"Being murdered," Ellaeva said, her voice flat. "I know. I have cradled them in my arms while the life left their bodies. Justice has been thrown out of that kingdom."

"Then you know more about that than I," he said, lowering his voice to a bare whisper. "They've been coming here in ones and twos, or sometimes three, broken and bleeding and carrying tales a man ought not ever hear in his life. They burnt the Temple of Ahura in Ellair, did you know? Said women had no place dispensing justice over men, that it was a man's job."

She sucked in a breath. Either Oriella hadn't known, or it happened after she left. "Burnt it?"

The priest nodded his dark head mournfully. "There's no justice there no more, and I don't reckon there'll be freedom for much longer neither. Time already for me to be moving on. I mislike being so close to the border these days. I doubt the Temple will send a replacement when I go."

"Thank you." She dropped a few coins in the charity jar on the bartop. The priests used it to feed and care for the poor and others in need.

"Do you want a drink?"

Lynam's voice at her ear made her jump. She'd been so engrossed in her conversation she'd not even noticed him drawing nearer.

"No." She shot him a warning look, although of course he would naturally offer the captain of his guard a beer notwithstanding she couldn't drink.

Lynam shrugged and ordered for himself. Behind him, the bar was starting to fill up. A few of the officers from Lynam's guard wandered in for an ale, and then right behind them, a knot of almost a dozen locals. The farmers all had loud, carrying voices, and they filled the room with bluster and calls for ale in moments.

"Seems unfair a priest of Kelich can drink on the job and you can't," he murmured, as the

man moved off to pour.

"He's responsible for dispensing alcohol, not justice," she snapped.

"True enough, but you'll need to at least nurse a beer now and then if you don't want the soldiers asking questions."

He was right, much as she wished he wasn't. "Another night. I'm going upstairs."

She turned and strode away, noting that the table where she'd left Drault was now empty, both tankards drained dry and abandoned. A newly arrived trio of farmers pushed the mugs aside to make room for their own, heedless of how the froth spilled.

Lynam's puzzlement, nestling firmly in the corner of her head that was devoted to his feelings, followed her out of the room. Walking down the narrow, dimly lit corridor to the stairs, she tried to ignore the almost constant sense of his presence, but it was like an itch she couldn't scratch—no, a *splinter* in her foot that she couldn't find. A blister buried beneath a callus on her heel that just wouldn't burst. Things had been better when he was a continent away and the sense of him was little more than a sense of his direction. Now his emotions were constantly in her head, and it was harder to walk away from him when she could *feel* his emotions for her.

As she turned the corner into the stairs, she collided hard with someone coming the other way. The impact knocked her backwards to the floor, onto her bottom. She gasped, and then a hand reached down and grasped hers.

She froze. The hand belonged to Drault. He smiled that same oily smile, the ale fumes strong this close, as he hauled her to her feet. She recoiled, snatching her hand free of his grip.

"Captain," he said, with the hint of a slur. "We meet again."

She backed away, painfully aware of the deserted hallway stretching behind her. The sound of laughter and good cheer seemed a long way down the other end. Should she just return to the common room? *Foolishness*. She was perfectly capable of looking after herself.

So why then did she feel so uneasy being alone with him in this hallway?

She took a step towards the common room, then hesitated, humiliation burning hot in her cheeks at the thought of running away from the smirking little prince. Besides, if she fled to the common room and Drault followed her in there... how then would she explain it to Lynam? The mere suggestion that Drault had made her feel... *uncomfortable* could be a disaster.

"That's right, captain. Stay and talk awhile."

The sense of threat deepened, but still she hesitated. At the thought of what Drault might intend, fear fluttered in her stomach, but she clamped down on it before anything leaked through to Lynam. Only Lynam's honour held him back from having his revenge on Drault for Zaheva's murder; if he suspected *anything* of Drault it might be enough to tip him over the edge.

She took a step forward. "Excuse me, Your Highness, I need to get past."

Drault tried to reach for her hand again, but she moved away, retreating another step. He pursued, grabbed her by the shoulders and pressed his lips against hers. She slammed her hands into his chest.

Drault stumbled away "Bitch!"

She wiped his drool off her face with one trembling hand and glared at him. No man had *ever* dared touch her that way. "Let me past."

His lip curled as he looked her up and down insultingly. "I should have known Aharris wasn't sticking it in you. Bastard's still moping over his dead bitch wife, and he seems to like women pushing him around. But you should know, captain, no woman says no to *me*."

"No." She enunciated the word carefully, as though speaking to an idiot.

But Drault only sneered, the expression making him even uglier than usual. "I know what you want. How about we just go on upstairs and enjoy a little of each other's company? I'll be the best lover you ever have."

"How about we don't." She dropped one hand to the hilt of her sword, her pulse beating a rapid tattoo in her throat. Thoughts of Zaheva and all the horrible things Drault did to her flashed through her mind. Shot in the back. Raped. Her throat slit. But that wasn't what frightened her; it was the possibility of Lyrarn suspecting that Drault intended to do it to her.

Drault's gaze locked on the hand on her sword, registering her threat.

"Not used to women with weapons, are you?" She took a step forward, adjusting her grip and ready to draw. "Now let me past."

His sneer slipped, and he stepped to the side just far enough to let her squeeze through.

She kept her eyes on him as she passed. The light of the candles burning at the foot of the steps illuminated the sweat glistening on his face. He bared his teeth at her, and then reached out and slapped her on the arse. Immediately, she slammed him against the wall, drawing her belt knife and pressing the blade to his throat.

He froze, his eyes rolling in their sockets as he tried to glimpse the knife.

"I know what you did to Zaheva," she said, leaning close enough to smell the stink of his fear. "Aharris may feel bound by duty and obligation, but don't make the mistake of thinking I feel similarly. You come near me again, you touch me again, and I'll cut it off."

She pushed him away, and he sneered at her again.

She climbed the stairs, her back erect. Not once did she glance back, but the touch of his eyes followed her all the way to the first landing.

As she rounded the corner, footsteps pattered away ahead of her, and she caught the briefest glimpse of green skirts flashing out of sight at the next landing up.

There, she paused and slid the dagger back into its sheath, her body shaking as it slipped free of her iron-hard control. Lyrarn couldn't hear of this, not even a hint, or he would murder Drault and then have to face the consequences. She let out a long shuddering breath. She'd made an enemy of Drault this night, and no one could be allowed to know.



Ellaeva licked nervously at her lip as they approached the border checkpoint, her hands tightening on the reins. The animal, a fractious war-trained stallion, danced under her touch. Loosening the reins, she moved the animal slightly off to the side of their procession as it snorted and cavorted before settling into a bone-jarring trot that carried her past the other riders and towards the head of the train. She grimaced. Though she'd ridden from a very young age, she had no particular fondness for horses, especially spirited ones. Lyrarn had insisted that the captain of his guard would have a warhorse, and so this great grey beast was what she now found herself stuck with.

Their group, much larger than she'd have liked, stretched out in a long train. The hundred soldiers, all mounted and at least a dozen of whom wore the red cloth arm bands, clustered around the large carriage intended to carry Lyrarn, Drault and Narrawen in the style expected of such dignitaries. Behind them trailed their aides and functionaries, wagons full of supplies, and even a trumpeter. The flapping banners of three different clans flew above the cavalcade: the Aharris sleeping dragon, the royal thistle in purple against a black background, and the golden rose of Macklyn, drawn with exaggerated thorns.

Her horse drew alongside the carriage. Naturally, Lyrarn was off somewhere on his horse

instead of riding in style and comfort. Narrawen, too, had brought her own horse and not yet stepped foot near the carriage.

Drault, however, leaned out the window, his customary sneer twisting his face as he watched her. The man might have been attractive in a clean-cut type of way, if he had another expression and even a hint of care in his green eyes. He was probably the reason Narrawen avoided the conveyance. Who would want to be locked up with such a person?

"Perhaps we should have given you a quieter nag, captain," he called.

When she met his gaze, he laughed and pulled back inside the carriage out of sight. Her mouth twisted. He obviously intended to salve his wounded pride of the night before by insulting her.

Lynam cantered over, riding his bright bay horse with the grace and ease of a nobleman born to the saddle. "We're here."

She glanced towards the head of the train. Distracted by Drault, she'd not noticed the outriders returning and the guards at the front drawing to a stop.

A small, square grey building marked the checkpoint, and Jerreki border guards poured out the door, shouting to one another in the Jerreki tongue and waving their arms. Their skin was so black as to be bordering on blue, much darker than the Mysenans to the south, but their hair was a shocking copper in contrast, a combination she'd never grown accustomed to but which bred as true as the green or grey eyes of most Jerreki. There were no women among them. Apart from the guards, the border crossing was abandoned, with no signs of the priestesses who'd fled through here in ones and twos. Had all her sisters in Jerrek fled – or were they dead? It had taken too many weeks to return here with the diplomatic party.

Narrawen trotted up to the guards on her pale gold gelding. As she drew rein, she, leaned down to speak to the nearest guard. Her bow was thrust through her girth strap. Lynam watched as Narrawen spoke to them, waving her hands to punctuate each point.

"I don't like having her and Drault along," he said. "They're an avalanche looking for somewhere to happen. You might as well have left me in Ahlleyn; I have no authority over this mission if either of them decides to gainsay me."

"I did not require your presence for your rank. I need the legitimacy this mission gives me, but I wanted *you* along to watch my back. I trust you; I trust neither of them."

"That's my worry, too." Lynam glanced at her sidelong. "What did Drault say to you?"

As was usually the case, his face fell into a frown when he spoke Drault's name, an expression she was sure was completely unconscious. What thoughts ran through his mind when he wore that expression?

"Nothing." She dropped a hand to her sword, feeling the tassel affixed there. It was real, even if the rest was illusion, as no mere trickery of the eye could fool the hands. She ran her thumb over the basket hilt, tracing the shape of the hidden dragons that did not match the visible design, and contemplated the crossing ahead.

The guard Narrawen was speaking to had a folded piece of paper in hand. He appeared to be giving curt, one-word answers to her questions, and finally he waved her through after a long look at her red hair. The rest of the group were instructed to remove their helmets or hoods or anything else that might obscure their faces. The men were waved through without further question, but the women who carried swords were required to offer them for inspection.

Ellaeva fumbled with the buckles on her baldric. Though clad in her cuir bouilli chest harness, she felt exposed in a way she'd never experienced before, *knowing* she was the woman they were looking for. She'd been turned back last time, but would they be so magnanimous a second time? The thought made her loosen her blade in its scabbard.

Lynam looked sideways at her, his eyes weighing and measuring. She'd clamped down on her feelings right away last night, fast enough that she was sure none of her fear or outrage had bled down the link to him – but of course, he would wonder what she was hiding from him.

If he knew Drault had laid so much as a finger on her, he'd murder his liege's son in a heartbeat. And so she would convince him nothing untoward was going on, even while Drault no doubt schemed and plotted his revenge.

To end the discussion, she guided her horse in behind the carriage, but Lynam followed, falling in beside her. Thankfully, he spoke no further, just shot her brooding glances through his eyelashes.

The Jerreki soldiers peered through the windows at Drault, who said something curt. The guards waved the carriage through.

As Ellaeva approached with Lynam at her side, they gestured for Lynam to join the others in Jerrek, but indicated that she should stop. Though Lynam pulled his horse aside, he stayed, stubbornly waiting with her on the Ahlleyn side of the border.

Sweat trickled down her back under the heavy layers of her armour as she passed over the sword for inspection. The border guard wore a skirted Jerrek cuirass with the local style helmet, open-faced with extended cheek pieces, a nose guard and a crest of horsehair. He didn't even look at her as he took the sword, glanced at it, then shoved it back at her so hard it struck her chest. She tried to ignore his grey eyes on her face as she buckled the baldric back on. As she settled the sword on her hip, the guard waved two of his companions over.

They spoke in a low excited murmur. Their voices were too soft for her to catch more than a word here or there. Intermittently, a guard looked at her, then referred back to the drawing the first man held. One of them stabbed a finger at the paper and shook his head, and the other snatched it away.

"What are they saying?" Lynam had sidled back over unnoticed.

She jerked in the saddle, making the horse dance sideways at the sudden tightening of the reins. Glaring at Lynam, she made a sharp negative gesture. Whatever the guards were saying was lost beneath his words.

"I have no idea now," she said under her breath. She studied them as she tried to catch the thread of their conversation. They wore layered linen cuirasses of local design, reinforced by a thick band of iron scale around the waist. Given the way Jerrek conducted its trade, always suspicious of strangers, iron armour was likely expensive here, and too hot for the climate. She shifted her shoulders uncomfortably at the thought, aware of the sun beating down on her and the stickiness of her gambeson clinging to her back. The cold dreary rain of an Ahlleyn autumn was a distant memory here. That cuirass would be cooler, but offered some serious disadvantages as well. Its skirted bottom protected the groin, but the arms were bare, leaving the armpits exposed. The helm protected the head, face and back of the neck, but the throat was exposed to a precision thrust.

The swords on the Jerreki's hips were heavy and strangely-shaped. The blades were straight from the hilt to the midpoint then widened into a long flame shape. Single-edged, she guessed, though she'd never had occasion to handle one. Small bucklers were propped against the wall of the building, along with a rack of javelins.

"No war elephants," Lynam murmured.

She cut her eyes at him. "Did you expect any at the border?"

He smiled at the exaggerated sarcasm. "Not really. I'd just like to see one."

She sighed and resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Jerrek's war elephants were famous, but rarely seen, and no one knew where they came from... over the northern mountains, perhaps.

Few who crossed that way ever came back.

The guards returned in a clump, the first one still waving the drawing. One of the others, a man with sergeant's rank on his shoulder, snatched the paper away and turned back to Ellaeva, growling at the other men. They scurried farther down the train to continue the inspection.

The sergeant looked at the drawing, then at her face, and back at the drawing again. Finally he glanced at her sword.

"Is there a problem?" she asked him in Jerreki. For the first time in a long time, she found it difficult to keep her voice steady.

The sergeant jerked his thumb at her, indicating she could cross the border, and stalked down to inspect the next unfortunate in line.

The tension drained from her, and she kicked the horse into motion, a little breathless with relief. Lyrarn followed her.

She scowled at him. "Why did you wait?"

"What if he'd decided you *were* the woman he was looking for?"

"What if he did? More than likely he would have done nothing more than turn me back, like the last time. But that doesn't matter. You can't do things like that, Lyrarn. I'm not a porcelain doll in need of protection. What I need is for you to let me do my job, and accept all the risks that entails."

Leaving him gaping at her, she clapped her heels to the horse's flanks and cantered to the head of the train.



## Chapter 5

### *The Voice and the Blade*

As the procession wound down the main thoroughfare of Ellair, Ellaeva stared at the burnt-out hulk of the Temple of Ahura. In six years of service, she'd never come here, but the ruined temple's former beauty was still evident in the stateliness of the few partial walls that remained standing. Along one side, an entire rank of elegant arches remained intact. The stained-glass windows in the Tembran style had blackened and shattered in the heat, and the belfry and the right and rear of the temple were entirely gone. What remained was a twisted ruin of shattered and burnt timbers. The temple here had boasted a fantastic mosaic, but if any of it remained, it would be beyond repair. The stink of smoke and char lingered thick in her nostrils; the fire couldn't be more than two weeks old.

Lynam trotted up beside her and looked over at the ruined temple with a bitter twist to his mouth. "Why would anyone do this?"

Ellaeva shook her head, unable to find the words. Her stomach was a tight knot of tangled emotions. Though she'd been attacked personally in the course of her work, nothing struck as close to home as this – an attack on the goddess herself, and on everything she stood for. An attack on truth and justice. "I can think of only a few reasons, none of them good. No one with good intentions feels the need to hide from the eyes of justice."

"The temple housed the courts of justice and supplied the magistrates, didn't it?" he asked.

"Yes." The word came out softer than she liked, and she steeled herself, running through the calming exercises of her novitiate. Almost palpably, her cold mask fell into place. She couldn't allow her personal feelings to affect her work; she needed to treat this like it was any other god's temple that had been attacked.

Lynam was looking at her strangely, his head cocked quizzically but his mouth downturned. A slight pinch on his forehead indicated anger, and the emotions rolling down the link were a confused mix.

"I hate that you care so much," he said, "when they don't care for you at all."

She stiffened in the saddle. It wasn't for him, or for any man, to judge her sisters, even if she did it herself, even if her faith in the Order itself, if not her goddess, had been shaken by the

revelation that the Temple had stolen her away from her parents. It was her job to care for all people, man or woman or child, no matter their patron god, their country of birth, or how they felt about her personally.

She looked away, unable to meet his eyes. "You know why they feel about me as they do."

Zealots almost to a woman, the vast majority of Ahura's priestesses resented her existence outside the confines of the Order, and resented the fact that a Battle Priestess was not chosen from the ranks of the sisterhood. The women were magistrates, arbiters and executioners, and while empathy was not unknown to them, it was not their primary quality.

The anger in Lyram only deepened. "It doesn't make it right. You were up here holding them as they died—"

"And they would *still* hold us both to account should they ever learn the truth. I know this, and it changes nothing." Tears pricked her eyes at the memory of Oriella, and she glanced away again. Oriella might have understood, but the majority of the Order would not hesitate to condemn and sentence her for her crime of a single night with Lyram.

He muttered something under his breath. She couldn't catch the words, but his furious tone was evident.

Seeing her watching him, he said, "If Ahura chooses to let an indiscretion pass, the sisterhood have no authority over you."

"But," she said, "you have already come to the heart of the matter. They would do it because I was chosen to stand above them, but then I sullied the mantle of a Battle Priestess. Do you think I should care for them less because of that? If I only protected those who did not fear and hate me, I would have precious little work indeed."

She kicked her horse ahead a few paces, effectively ending the conversation, though she still seethed at his temerity. How dare he question the Order. She might at times despise them, or despair of them, but that was *her* burden to bear. If her righteous passion had guttered upon learning the Rahmyrrim were not responsible for her parents' deaths, if that made the days of obligation and the lonely nights harder to stand... well, it was no one's concern but her own.

The Temple of Chalon, built of polished white marble and domed in the Jerreki manner, with an arched entryway that came to a point at the top, stood not far down the street from Ahura's. The barred gates were closed and chained shut with a double wrap of extraordinarily thick steel links. Through the bars, a small group of men in white robes clustered in the courtyard, their hooded heads bent close together to speak, as though afraid of being overheard even within the locked grounds of their sanctuary. One of them looked up as they passed. His head jerked, and he locked gazes with her for a moment, and then her horse carried her past and out of sight.

Had he recognised her, even with her face disguised? Around one in ten of all those devoted to worship were sensitives who could pick up varying degrees of premonition from their god. If his connection to Chalon had revealed anything about her, she just needed to trust that he had a vested interest in keeping it to himself.

The chain on the gates of Chalon embodied the mood of fear and distrust she sensed shrouding the city. The initiates of Chalon, more than the initiates of any other temple, embraced life and love and people. They were, by their very nature, eternal optimists. The chain on the gate suggested they feared for their life enough to seal the temple even against those who sought Chalon's blessing of love, such as women hoping for a child. Dispensing love was one of the temple's primary functions, as dispensing justice was Ahura's, and it took something serious to stop them from carrying out their duties. But who could blame them? Anyone with the temerity to attack the sacred grounds of the goddess of death, truth and justice would not

balk at attacking any of the other five gods.

This street, like many others, had been all but abandoned. All through the city, the mood was subdued, and the few people out and about looked askance at the new arrivals. Although Jerrek had always been insular and received few visitors, when they had come in through the gate, the only queue had been of people waiting to leave. All the whispers on the street were about when Ahura's wrath would strike, and whether she would strike only the king or if her displeasure would fall upon the entire city.

"Is it safe for the other temples to remain?" Lyram asked.

"I don't know. But we should remain alert."

The streets remained sparsely populated, even as they drew closer to the palace. Only a few nobles or rich merchants were out in their carriages, presumably on business. More than one showed a dark face peering between curtains to scrutinise the new arrivals.

They rounded a bend in the street and there, at the end, loomed the palace, its confection of gleaming domes visible over the protective wall. Ellaeva lifted her brows at its massiveness, but a distinct sense of being unimpressed rolled down the link from Lyram. When she glanced over, his face was unusually blank.

Narrawen rode up between them, her gaze focused on Lyram; she didn't even deign to glance at Ellaeva. "Ready?" Even dressed for riding, she managed to look fabulous, with her hair streaming behind her in locks that never seemed to snarl.

Ellaeva pulled her horse away sharply to the right, and trotted on ahead as the procession slowed to a stop. She was needed at the front; nothing at all to do with the duchess, of course. A sick feeling rolled down the link from Lyram, who was no doubt realising this was the time he must go and sit in the carriage with Drault, to keep up appearances.

Everard sat his horse at the front of the cavalcade, his stork-thin frame making the animal look somehow small, with his knobby-kneed legs hanging too far down the sides. He nodded perfunctorily to her as she joined him. From here, they were strictly the aide and guard captain for Lord Aharris, and Everard did a good job of concealing his personal disapproval of her behind his typical inscrutability.

The aide-de-camp, in his unofficial capacity as herald, kicked his horse forward to approach the guards before the gate. They were all men, all with the same black skin and shocking red hair as the border guards, and all wearing the white linen cuirasses, crested helmets with flared cheek-pieces, and flame-shaped swords on their hips. None of them acknowledged him.

Ellaeva frowned, and Everard glanced back at her uncertainly. Surely word of their arrival had been sent from the city gates? She shrugged, and flicked her fingers at him. Get on with it.

Everard cleared his throat. "We are the diplomatic delegation from Ahlleyn. His Highness Prince Drault of Ahlleyn, Duchess Narrawen of the Clan Macklyn, and Lord Lyram of the Clan Aharris."

The trumpeter played a sudden fanfare, the brassy notes shattering the stillness. Everard's horse flicked an ear disinterestedly, but Ellaeva's mount shuddered and shied until she pulled him back into line. Finally, the fanfare died away, leaving an awkward silence. Out of the corner of her eye, Ellaeva saw the trumpeter lower his instrument uncertainly, and then back away. Still the guards did not move, speak or acknowledge their arrival. She narrowed her eyes. Were they even blinking?

Then one at the front turned his head to look at Everard. "The delegation from Ahlleyn is welcome," he said in a droning monotone, then turned with a startling fluidity and banged on the gate with a gauntleted fist.

He resumed his original position without a word.

Ellaeva exchanged a glance with Everard. The aide quirked an eyebrow and shrugged. The greeting seemed odd at worst, rude at best.

"What now?" she whispered. "Did that seem... not quite right to you?"

"Indeed." Everard pulled his spectacles off and began polishing them. "It was not the expected behaviour. I am unsure what to do now."

"Are they even blinking?"

Everard's grey eyebrows flew up. When he spoke, his voice was slightly irritated. "It had not occurred to me that now was the opportune moment to reflect on such a trivial matter."

Then he paused, his brow furrowing, and turned, replacing his spectacles to squint at the unmoving rank of soldiers.

With a sudden groan, the gates cracked open and began to swing wide. In uncanny unison, the guards split into two ranks and stepped to either side of the opening portal. Inside, framed by the two gates, stood a single waiting figure dressed in voluminous black robes and a polished steel mask concealing the face. Black gloves covered their hands, and the hood covered their hair, giving no sign of their gender or nationality.

Behind the figure rose the bulk of the palace, fronted by a long, multi-tiered colonnade and topped by the huge dome. The expanse of wall was pierced with arch-shaped windows.

"Looks like the welcoming committee has spared no expense," Ellaeva said under her breath.

For a moment Everard's lips writhed before he schooled his expression back to stillness, and he made no response except to kick his horse into motion.

Ellaeva booted her grey after Everard. Behind them, the rest of the procession began to move into the palace courtyard in a clatter of hooves.

"Welcome." The figure stepped forward as Everard and Ellaeva pulled their horses to a stop.

Everard slid from the saddle and executed a smooth bow. If the appearance of the greeter disturbed him, it didn't show in his comportment. "I am aide-de-camp to Lord Lyrām Aharris. This is Captain Ellie Decourt, his lordship's captain of the guard."

"I am the Voice of the King."

The words were spoken in the Ahlleyn tongue, in a voice deep enough that it could have been a man, but not so deep that it was obviously not a woman, either. Was that a deliberate choice? So that the Voice of the King would have no personal features of their own? Of course, it was known that Abdal Rahman was current incumbent of the post, but he gave up that name upon his appointment.

"All negotiations shall be conducted through me." The voice issued eerily from between the polished but unmoving steel lips. "The king does not speak directly with foreigners."

Lyrām's guards had been filing through the gate and splitting to either side of the courtyard to avoid blocking the entrance. Now the carriage clattered to a halt a few yards away from the Voice, the four matched greys snorting and blowing.

The driver scrambled down and opened the door just in time for Drault to emerge. He surveyed the scene with his imperious gaze from the carriage door.

"Is this all the welcome you give to the Prince of Ahlleyn?" He leapt to the cobbles, ostentatiously resting one hand on the hilt of his sword and surveying the Voice with an insultingly dismissive look.

Ellaeva sighed, but said nothing. Jerrek was an austere nation, and she'd expected an understated welcome, but as the highest-ranking noble on this venture, Drault was ostensibly in

charge, and she couldn't gainsay him. However, if the unmitigated ass kept on like that, he would ruin it all.

"I'm sure their hospitality will be more than adequate, Your Highness." Lyrām's voice was cold enough to raise frost on the carriage goldwork. He didn't spare the prince so much as a glance as he stepped past him with Narrawen on his arm. The duchess had her bow slung over one shoulder, but otherwise looked ready for a ball, with the road dust already cleaned from her face.

Lyrām offered the Voice a bow. "I am Lord Lyrām of Clan Aharris, and this lovely lady is—"

"Duchess Narrawen." She managed a credible curtsy, notwithstanding the bow on her shoulder. "And perfectly capable of speaking for myself."

"I am the Voice of the King. During your stay here, all arrangements for your retinue will be made with me, and I will ensure the smooth ordering of your stay. You and your retinues will be housed in the palace proper, and you may bring one guard apiece." The Voice pivoted on one heel and strode away. "Please, leave your horses. They will be tended to. As will your soldiers."

As if those words were a signal, men in brightly coloured trousers, matching open-fronted vests, and white shirts rushed out of a wide door, which presumably led to the stables, and began unsaddling the horses. Other palace functionaries were speaking to the guards.

Narrawen snapped her fingers at her captain, Dugahl, a tall, red-bearded brute of a man with a claymore on his back. Drault hesitated a moment, before barking a curt order at his own captain. Ellaeva simply fell into step behind Lyrām as he followed the Voice up onto the colonnade.

"There are a few rules you must abide by while you are here," the Voice said.

"Rules?" Lyrām frowned.

It was cooler in the shade of the colonnade, out of the blistering sun. The Voice stopped before the open entryway into the palace interior and turned to face them.

"Yes, rules. Your women will be expected to abide by our standard of seemliness. It is *unseemly* for a woman to be seen in public. Thus, many women in the palace do not leave their rooms, and only accept invited guests to their quarters—but you will not receive such invitations. If the women cannot remain in their quarters, then they must dress appropriately. You will be provided with suitable garments."

Ellaeva looked back through the columns to survey the courtyard. Indeed, as the Voice had said, there were no women to be seen in the courtyard. Narrawen and Lyrām glanced around quickly too, although Drault merely leaned against a column looking bored as he inspected his fingernails.

"What kind of garments must the women wear?" Lyrām asked, when it became apparent Drault had no intention of engaging in the conversation.

"Nothing you should find too objectionable," the Voice said. "A floor-length veil of cloth, no more."

Ellaeva's frown deepened. That was a very old Jerrek garment that had been worn by women who could not practically seclude themselves from public view. It had been discarded centuries earlier. Jerrek was already a conservative culture by the standards of the other kingdoms, but hadn't Alagondar said it was regressing into barbarity? He'd mentioned women withdrawing from public view, but not new standards of dress. Why was the country returning to its old ways?

Lyrām glanced at her, and she gave a tiny nod.

"I suppose we can agree to that," he said. "What else?"

"Your women must surrender their weapons."

"What?" The exclamation burst from Ellaeva before she could stop it, and her hand went immediately to the hilt of Ahura's blade on her hip. "You cannot expect Ahlleyn soldiers to surrender their weapons."

"We can't agree to that." Lyrarn shot Ellaeva a placating look, then positioned himself squarely before the Voice. It was the stance he used when taking a stand on something. "This is entirely unreasonable. You propose to disarm my guard captain?"

"It is not negotiable. Weapons are of men, and it is unseemly for women to handle them. You need not worry; we will return them to you on your departure. Lord Aharris, you may choose another guard to accompany you for protection instead, but your captain must still surrender her weapon – as must every other woman in your retinue." The polished steel mask looked significantly at Narrawen, who clutched her bow to herself protectively. "If you refuse to disarm the women, we will escort you to the border."

Ellaeva stiffened, and Lyrarn looked over at her. Had some surge of alarm just reached him through the link?

She shook her head. He must not argue any further. It was imperative she complete her investigation, and if giving up the sword temporarily was necessary to find out what was going on in Jerrek, then so be it. To reiterate the point, she began unbuckling the baldric, then pulled her sgian dubh from her boot; she'd picked up the Ahlleyn custom of carrying the tiny blade while at Caisteal Aingeal.

A serving man in bright pants and vest appeared to take the sword from her, secure in his ignorance of the fearsome blade in his grasp. He moved so quietly in his black half boots she'd not even heard him approach. Bowing slightly, he moved to Narrawen, who handed over her bow, her sgian dubh, and her belt knife with more reluctance.

Lyrarn turned to his aide. "Everard, see to it that our people are aware the women must hand over their weapons."

Everard nodded and hurried back to the courtyard. Lyrarn turned back to the Voice with an impeccably polite smile, though his voice was cold. "Is there anything else?"

"All women in Jerrek must be accompanied by their appointed tutor, a man who is essentially their legal guardian. We make an exception to the tutor-requirement for visitors, but if you choose not to appoint guardians, your women will be confined to their quarters for your entire stay. If you do appoint a tutor, each woman may move around in the company of her tutor, but must obey curfew regardless. Now, if you have no further questions, I will show you to your rooms."

The Voice turned and glided in through the palace entrance.

Lyrarn glowered after the robed man. Ellaeva ignored him.

"You will ensure my sword is well-cared for?" she asked, following the Voice. "It is a family heirloom, and I would be most displeased if it was damaged."

The Voice turned. "Captain Decourt, I assure you, the purification ritual will not harm your weapon."

Her hands curled tight. "Purification? What kind of purification?"

"Weapons with wood components will be purified with heated sacred oils, while metal weapons such as swords will be purified by fire at low temperatures, to cleanse them of corrupting influences."

The Voice turned and swept away, leaving Ellaeva chilled even in the stifling humidity of Jerreki autumn.

Ahura's blade was impervious to heat and would emerge from the fire cold – and that was all they'd need to know that the Battle Priestess was here in Jerrek.