

DEATH RITES

by Tanya Huff

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AS the sun rose and the Seventh Army rose with it, the assassin's body appeared, lifted up over the top of the fortress wall by unseen hands.

"Marshal Arnon!"

Holding his kilt, the marshal stepped out of his tent in time to hear the soft melon crack of the assassin's head hitting stone as the body reached the end of its arc. "Sound carries in these hills," he said thoughtfully, threading straps through buckles and cinching them tight. Kilt secured, he glanced up first at the wall and then at the senior of the two soldiers on guard. "Was that what you wanted me to see?"

"Yes, sir."

The marshal nodded and turned on one bare heel back toward the tent. "Tell Commander Zayit I want to see her immediately. You have my permission to leave your post."

"Sir, if Orban is dead..."

Marshal Arnon glanced up from his breakfast. "I think we can safely say that Orban is dead, Commander."

"Yes, sir. Orban's death—added to Visolela's and Ganit's—leaves the Seventh Army with only two assassins. Both are very young and wouldn't stand a chance against Commander Jolan—ex-Commander Jolan," she corrected hurriedly as the marshal's expression darkened.

"Especially as Jolan has already dealt with Orban, Visolela, and Ganit?"

Commander Zayit winced at the question clearly not intended to be answered. The failure of the three assassins was, in a sense, the marshal's failure, and he wasn't the sort of man who'd appreciate the reminder.

They'd effortlessly regained the three villages that had fallen under the ex-commander's control, but First and Second Divisions together had not yet been able to come up with a way to pry her out of her hilltop fortress—which wasn't surprising since the place had fallen to Imperial expansion originally by betrayal from within. All three dead assassins had managed to get inside the walls but with Jolan expecting them...

A coin hit the table in front of her. Startled, she looked up to see the marshal's amber eyes locked on her face.

"Crescent for your thoughts, Commander?"

"I was just thinking about the situation, sir."

"Yes, the situation." His lip curled. "It's beginning to look as though a siege is my only choice. So much for a quick and glorious end to Jolan's treason."

"Yes, sir." A siege had been his only choice from the moment he'd allowed the ex-commander's small army to reach the hill fort. Too bad it had taken the lives of so many good soldiers to prove it to him.

"You're thinking again. How long was the siege in '64?" he continued before she could work out the response he required.

Zayit waited until he finished wiping his face with a damp cloth and said, "Almost two years, sir."

"Seventeen years ago." He indicated to his body servant that the table could be cleared. "And Jolan was there."

"Yes, sir."

"How long do you think she was planning this... rebellion."

Probably from the moment some pissant third cousin of the Emperor was promoted over officers who actually knew what they were doing. "I don't know, sir."

"No. Of course not."

Zayit stepped out of the way as Arnon stood and strode purposefully from his tent, falling into step behind his left shoulder as he passed. When he stopped at his customary place and stared toward the fortress, she wondered if he was thinking about the men and women who, by his command, had charged the narrow approach and died. Not once, but twice.

"I think we can safely say she's stocked up on arrows, rocks, and oil," had been the marshal's only comment at the time.

His tent should have been in the center of the encampment, but he'd ordered it placed so Jolan could see him from the walls.

"I want her to know I'm here."

"I doubt she cares," Commander Baird had muttered a little too loudly and now Zayit was the only senior officer the marshal saw.

"The raven's back, sir."

"Are you certain it's the same bird, Commander?"

She was, actually. Something set this raven apart. It was larger than most, and it had a way of staring into the camp that lifted all the hair on the back of her neck. Today, it had drifted silently down to land beside the crumpled black figure outside the fortress walls. "Yes sir. I'm certain."

Then a second raven landed like a shadow beside the first.

"It seems to have found a companion."

"Yes, sir. Shall I send a squad out to collect the body?"

"No. Let him lie, as Visolela and Ganit lie."

"Sir, Visolela and Ganit went off the cliff. Orban is on the road."

"I see where the body is, Commander. Why do you think Jolan had it thrown onto the road? Precisely so

we would send a squad to reclaim it." He squared broad shoulders and folded his arms. "But I give the orders here, not her."

Zayit couldn't see his face, but she could hear the edged smile in his voice. Her right hand clutched at the silver-and-onyx ring she wore on the smallest finger of her left hand. The ring, given to officers with their commission, marked her as priest of Jür, Goddess of Battles. The marshal's ring held a ruby, the color of fresh blood. As he commanded the Seventh Army, he was high priest of its goddess as well. He'd accepted the position as his due and had performed the necessary rituals with pomp and circumstance.

To challenge his belief would be to challenge his authority as the marshal of the Seven Annies and destroy her career.

At least five soldiers—as well as the two on guard—were close enough to have overheard. By midday, everyone would know Marshal Arnon had refused rites to one of the dead.

"Sir, we weren't able to do the rites for the others, but Orban..."

"Will have to do without them as well. I have brought two divisions here for Jolan, burned a village, and lost three assassins. Now, I will have to maintain a division at her feet indefinitely. I think she has dictated quite enough." He nodded toward the road. "Besides, Jür has sent her ravens. I'd say it was Visolela and Ganit come for their friend, but assassins have no friends, even among themselves. Have a courier prepare, and I'll send my decision to the capital this morning."

Eyes locked on the ravens, Zayit started. "Your decision, sir?"

"About the siege, Commander." Turning, he smiled down at her. "I doubt the Emperor, my cousin, needs to be kept abreast of carrion."

"Yes, sir." She remained where she was until she heard the tent flap fall, and then she stayed a moment longer as the senior of the soldiers standing guard murmured, "Why aren't the ravens feeding?"

They were standing, one at each end of the body, looking toward the camp.

The marshal of the Seventh Army was the Emperor's cousin and that brought his message directly to the Emperor. His Imperial Majesty read the report and asked to speak personally with the courier.

"Meaning no disrespect, Majesty," Marshal Usef of the First Army protested, "but why?"

"Why indeed?" the Emperor asked dryly. "Given that Arnon allowed the traitor to reach the hill fort in the first place, I find it difficult to believe things are going as well as he suggests."

"You think he lies to you, Majesty?"

"I think he omits detail, Usef."

Face flushed, the Emperor slid forward to the edge of his throne. "Do I understand you to say that Marshal Arnon refused death rites to a blade of Jür?"

"Yes, Majesty."

"When he could have recovered the body?"

"Yes, Majesty."

"And this is known?"

"Yes, Majesty."

The Emperor lifted his gaze from the kneeling courier, met Marshal Usef's eye, and jerked his head toward the door. When the courier was gone and the two men were alone, he growled, "Didn't we send our cousin to the South Province to keep him out of trouble?"

"Yes, Majesty. You'd observed he was neither stupid nor without ambition."

"I've changed my mind about the stupid part." He slapped the rolled report against his thigh. "He'll send both divisions over to that traitor if he keeps this up. He'll turn a small rebellion into a civil war."

"That is possible, Majesty." The current border of the Seventh Province had been secure for barely a generation.

"I want this taken care of. Now. Send a message immediately—Second Division can go back to the garrison, but Arnon's to remain with the siege."

"Punishment, Majesty?"

"Let's just say I'm not happy with him." The Emperor's smile was tight. "If I'm to fix this, I can't have him wandering all over Jür's battlefield."

"Shall I..."

"No." A raised hand cut Usef's question short. "He's family. I'll deal with it myself."

Marshal Chela of the Sixth Army read the message handed directly into her care by an Imperial Courier for the third time. His Imperial Majesty wanted to borrow her best assassin. Unfortunately, her best assassin would be under the authority of the garrison's healers for another few weeks.

"If his... Imper... i... al Majes... ty com... mands..."

"Lie down, Neegan." Chela pushed him back onto the bed with her voice. Not even she would touch an assassin uninvited. "Even if the healers would let you go, I'm not sure I would. Jolan's already destroyed three blades—I'm not saying you wouldn't be able to deal with her under normal circumstances, but you've got a hole in your throat you've barely recovered from."

His lips pressed into a thin line, and one brow rose.

Chela, who'd known him for twenty years, translated easily. "Then why am I here? I want to know what you think about my sending Vree and Bannon instead. Granted they're young, but they're good—they should be, with you overseeing their training—and they'll be unexpected. Jolan resigned her commission before they were posted, and as far as I know there has never been a team of assassins in the Seven Armies before." Her smile nearly buried her eyes in curves of flesh. "Also, it's considerably more politic to send the Emperor an option rather than a refusal."

Neegan held out a thin hand. "Or... ders..."

"Sorry, my eyes only. And theirs if you think they can handle the job."

This expression a stranger could have translated.

"How can you decide if you don't know what you're sending them into?" She lowered her bulk onto the stool beside the bed. "This much is common knowledge: Commander Jolan's treason has allowed Arnon, that pompous ass, to put himself into a bad situation. The fortress is impossible to take down from

without, but there's a way in Jolan hasn't been able to find or she'd have closed it down. It isn't like her to make a point by killing assassins as they come through."

"Ar... un?"

She smiled again at the missing rank. An assassin had no family but the army. For Neegan to deliberately insult a superior officer... "They'll be taking no orders from Marshal Arnon. The Emperor is taking care of this; they go in under his orders alone."

He forced a lungful of air through the ruin of his throat. "Send... them."

Bannon dug a finger into one of the grain bags they rode with and ground the kernels together. "I'm not sure I like being loaned out like a waterskin or a whetstone."

"Orders are orders," Vree shrugged without looking over at her brother. She didn't have to look, she knew what she'd see. He'd be lying back, wearing only kilt and sandals and a petulant expression. "These orders just happen to come directly from the Emperor."

"Yeah? And that's another thing. Since when does the Emperor get directly involved in this sort of shit?"

"When it involves family," she said with pointed emphasis on the last word.

"An assassin has no family but the army," Bannon reminded her, poking her hard in the ribs.

The carter glanced back at the wrestling match, shaking her head. Easy to believe these two had trained together all their lives—they fit together like moving puzzle pieces. Less easy to believe they were brother and sister, in spite of an obvious physical resemblance. There was a sexuality in the way he moved that teased and provoked at the same time and a tension in her responses indicated she was well aware of it.

None of my business, the carter reminded herself. All assassins were a little bit crazy, and rumors in the Sixth Army said these two were crazier than most.

Just before noon, they passed the ruin of Sabu.ro. The buildings and most of the surrounding olive groves had been burned. In the months since, very little had been rebuilt.

"After Commander Jolan pulled back, Marshal Arnon turned the Seventh Army loose on it," the carter explained when Bannon asked why.

Which was all the explanation necessary.

If Marshal Arnon turned the army loose, there wasn't anything to rebuild with.

"The people of Sabu.ro probably thought that sort of thing never happened to Imperial citizens," Vree observed dryly.

"That'll teach them to harbor traitors," her brother agreed in the same almost sarcastic tone.

The carter heard double, even triple meanings, and decided not to ask.

They stopped in the heat of the day, feeding, watering and resting the oxen, then continued in the relative cool of the evening. Just before dark, the carter looped the reins and swiveled around on the seat. They were getting close; an army encampment left a distinct signature on the breeze, and she wanted to let her passengers know they should start thinking about slipping away unseen.

They'd already slipped.

Both assassins and their kit had vanished. They'd even shuffled the indentations of their bodies out of the bags of grain.

Impressed, in spite of her pique, for the only sounds they'd had to cover their departure had been made the wagon itself, she'd barely turned back to her oxen when she heard a horse approaching. A moment after that an Imperial Courier appeared out of the dusk, the single golden starburst on his banner catching the last light of the setting sun.

"You've got to admire their sense of timing," she muttered, but whether she was speaking of the assassins or the courier she wasn't entirely sure.

"The Emperor has taken care of it."

"Sir?"

Marshal Arnon waved the message with its broken Imperial seal under the commander's nose. "First he keeps me here, and now he has sent his own assassin into the fortress. I am to have *my* people in position so that when the gates are opened they can take advantage of the opportunity his Imperial Majesty has provided."

Commander Zayit frowned. "There are no assassins in the First Army."

"You think the Emperor can't get assassins if he needs them?"

"No, sir."

"No, sir, indeed," the marshal mocked, throwing the message down onto his map table with enough force that its passage caused the lamp hanging from the centerpole to swing violently back and forth, painting dark shadows on the inside walls of the tent.

"When will the gates be opened, sir?" Zayit asked, trying not to think of how much the shadows looked like raven's wings. The longer the army spent looking at the dried and desiccated bundle Orban had become, the longer they spent speculating about the birds—three of them now—that came every morning to perch between them and the fortress, the longer they had to mutter about rites denied, the less like an army they were and the more like a mob. So far discipline had held, but it was becoming harder and harder for the officers to hold things together. If something didn't happen soon. . .

"The gate opens tomorrow morning. My Imperial cousin tells me to ready the division without warning the sentries on the wall. Does he think I'm a complete idiot? This is *my* army!"

Actually, it was the Emperor's army, but that was another thing the marshal didn't like to be reminded of.

"Well, don't just stand there, Commander! Ready a company!" Lip curled, the marshal turned on her, arms spread sarcastically wide. "Didn't you hear: the Emperor has taken care of it."

The easiest way to avoid being given orders by Marshal Arnon was to avoid Marshal Arnon—their orders had been quite clear about that. They'd been less clear about other aspects of the job.

The original courier had known little about how the three dead assassins had gotten into the city. He knew there was a stream. It wasn't much, but since Orban, called from Third Division after the deaths of the other two assassins, had found it with the same information, Vree and Bannon weren't concerned. They'd all survived the same training, and an access to a target that one of their peers could find, they could find faster.

The stream was easy to find. As dusk turned to true darkness and the sky over the hills turned from sapphire to onyx, they reached the place where it poured out of the earth. Knee-deep in the icy water, Bannon ran a hand under the rock lip as far as he could. "If's doable," he said at last, stepping out. "But only just. If you had anything in the way of tits, sister-mine, you'd never make it."

Vree snorted and began stripping off her uniform. "Then you'd better keep your sling on, I'd hate for you to scrape anything that dangled off against a rock."

His smile flashed white in the darkness. "That water's so cold, it won't much matter."

They kept their voices low, the essess softened, although they were too far from either camp or fortress to be heard. Caution had kept them alive for the last two years—unlike most seventeen- and eighteen-year-olds, they had a clear knowledge of their own mortality.

Prepared for the stream and the sort of swim it had likely meant, they separated the necessities out of their kit and wrapped them in waxed linen, careful to keep the bundles compact.

"Who goes first?"

"If d better be me," Bannon sighed stepping back into the water wearing his sling and a throwing knife strapped to his left forearm. "I'm bigger. If get stuck, I want you behind me where you can shove."

"Makes sense." Wearing only an identical throwing knife, Vree followed him, sucking air through her teeth at the first icy caress against her thighs. At the rock, she tied a silk rope around Bannon's waist. There was a small danger it could get hung up, but taking out this particular target without their kit was more of a challenge than she'd accept—although during their journey, Bannon had expressed interest in trying. She watched her brother fill his lungs—once, twice, three times—**and tried not to grin at his expression as he submerged. If d be her turn soon enough.**

The dark water was shallow and the moon nearly full. Vree watched the glimmer of Bannon's shoulders disappear, his back, his legs, his feet. The rope played out smoothly through her fingers. She'd counted slowly to a hundred and fifteen when the rope stilled. Four feet, maybe five followed Bannon into the hill all at once, then three short tugs. He'd reached the other side.

Moving quickly, working her fingers to keep them from going numb hi the cold, she tied off both kits, one behind each other. One breath. Two. A sound from the shore. Drawing in the thud breath, she turned.

The unmistakable **silhouette of three ravens watched her from the dead branches of a skeletal tree.**

One hand rose to touch the onyx amulet of Jnr she wore on a leather thong around her neck, the other pulled twice at the rope. Releasing the third breath, she dropped her gaze to the water, but even as she followed the two packets in under the rock, she could feel the ravens vatching.

The cold made it hard to think about anything but the cold. There wasn't room enough to swim against the current, nor was it smooth enough to allow Bannon to drag her along with their supplies. Arms outstretched, she pulled herself forward, counting slowly once again.

At 71, her reaching hand felt waxed linen. It wasn't moving. Pulling herself up as dose as she could, she stretched out an aim beneath it, along the bottom. The stream bed narrowed suddenly, went from a horizon-

tal slice through the hill to a vertical one and the first kit had jammed.

...72...

... 73...

... 74...

... 75...

The rear kit pressed harder against her shoulder, she punched the bottom of the first as hard as she could.

... 76...

...77...

All at once it jerked free and through. She guided the second as well as she was able and followed, turning sideways and up, the rock scraping almost gently against belly and front of thighs. A six-count delay would have meant nothing in warmer water, but her lungs were already aching and she had a thirty-eight-count to go.

The current weakened as the passage widened, and by a hundred she had the rope wrapped around one hand while the other kept her head clear of protrusions on the tunnel roof.

At 117 she surged out into open water. At 119 she surfaced and sucked in a lungful of air that had so much water in it, it was barely breathable. The noise told her she'd surfaced in the spray of a waterfall. Then her feet touched sand, a questing hand touched rock and she pulled herself up onto a ledge.

"Remind me to thank his Imperial Majesty for that experience," Bannon muttered in the darkness. "My balls climbed up so high they're sitting on my shoulders."

"Teach them to ask for crackers, and I'd pay to see it." His voice told her he was standing, so she stood as well.

They spent the next few moments warming up. Fingers stuffed into her armpits, she ran on the spot and heard Bannon doing the same. Had they not just come out of the water, the air underground would have been a cool relief after the scorching heat outside. As it was, it was almost warm and without a layer of wet cloth against skin, exercise was enough to chase the cold. When her feet no longer felt like blocks of wood and dexterity had returned, Vree reached out and lightly touched her brother's shoulder. "I vote we risk a light," she said when he stilled.

The waxed linen had done its job. A moment later, they were studying the dimensions of the cave.

"Looks like we climb up beside the waterfall." Bannon's sigh blew out the candle.

They didn't bother dressing, the climb would leave them almost as wet as the swim although considerably warmer. Vree climbed with her eyes closed—it kept her from straining to see through impenetrable darkness. At the top, they walked against the stream through another passage just high enough to keep their heads and hands out of the water. When the passage opened up, a rising shelf of sand led them to a beach and the silence told them they could safely light the candle again.

The beach led them to a cleft.

A climb.

Another passage.

Another pool.

Flood waters had carved only a single path. They couldn't have gotten lost. The three assassins who'd taken this way before them had died in the fortress, so there had to be a way in.

"Your turn to go first, sister-mine."

It took three dives before Vree felt the opening in the rock and then one more to fill her lungs and go through it. She'd counted to 70 and had almost decided to go back, when the rock opened up above her. Another thirty count and she surfaced. Her fingers brushed dressed stone.

"About time," Bannon muttered when she returned. "Too much slaughtering water down here for us not to end up in a well."

"Commander Jolan has to know that's how the others came into the fortress, but she can't cut off her water supply." Running on the spot, Vree was thinking out loud as she warmed. "She's known from the moment Ganit missed his target. He died the same night he went in, and it had to have been pretty obvious he came out of water. Visolela had to know she was climbing into a trap. Orban, too."

Bannon shrugged. "When you know there's a trap, you avoid it."

"True. It's been..." She counted back. "... fifteen days since Orban. Commander Jolan had to know how many blades Marshal Arnon had with him and that he won't ask one of the other armies for help—he wouldn't want to look weak. She knows the only thing he can do is settle in for a siege, so she won't be expecting us. But she won't have totally let down her guard. She won't have someone staring down the well, but she's not the type to leave an access unguarded."

Marshal Chela had seen they were as well briefed on their target as time allowed.

"So we can get to the lip of the well without trouble, but after that we'll have to be careful?"

"Yeah."

"Why didn't you just slaughtering say so?"

Vree sighed. "I was thinking out loud."

"You think too much, sister-mine."

Unwrapping their kit, they ate the dried meat and honeyed date bars while strapping on their weapons. They'd kept leather and steel dry as long as possible, climbing into a trap they'd need them at hand. Their clothing they rerolled in the waxed linen and strapped it to their backs—wet clothing would leave a trail, they'd dress once they were safely inside.

Three quarters of the way up the well, Vree stretched out an arm and touched Bannon's cheek. When he stilled, she signed *inside* against his skin. He nodded. The well was not only within the fortress wall, but within the fortress itself.

Just below the rim, they stopped. Listened.

Nothing.

Vree straightened her knees until her eyes cleared the edge. The well room was so dark, they might as well have still been in the caves under the hill. No guards hid in the darkness. Soundlessly, she slipped up and over the side, felt Bannon standing beside her, and moved off to the right. A moment later, each

having determined half the dimensions of the room, they met again.

Commander Jolan had secured the well room by simply filling in most of an open arch and putting a door where there'd never been a door. The inconvenience for anyone drawing water had clearly been outweighed by the alternative—throats slit.

"Guard outside?" Bannon breathed against her ear.

Vree nodded, pointing to the tiny line of light.

The only reason to have light was so that someone could see.

"One or two?"

Vree pressed her head to the crack and waited. Two soldiers—and all Jolan's traitors were ex-Seven Armies—guarding a locked cellar leading nowhere fifteen days after anything had happened, would be talking.

After a while, she laid one finger against Bannon's cheek.

They'd have to convince the guard to open the door without calling for help.

It had been fifteen days.

Fifteen slaughtering days.

And yet here he was taking his turn in the bowels of the fortress—the shitty bowels of the fortress, he amended—waiting for Marshal Moronic-Cousin-to-the-Emperor Arnon to try something stupid. Arnon would if anyone would, but still...

It had been *fifteen* days.

Legs crossed, back against the rough wood of the door, he picked at his teeth with the point of his dagger. He'd never been so tempted to fall asleep on duty.

Bored, bored, slaughtering bored...

The sudden scrape of stone against stone inside the well room jerked him erect. A muffled curse spun him around. The distant splash brought both brows in under the rim of his helm.

Something had fallen into the well.

Something big.

There were more distant splashes. Smaller ones. As if someone had fallen and was struggling in the water.

Marshal Arnon was scraping the bottom of the barrel as far as assassins were concerned. According to Commander Jolan, there were two fifteen-year-olds left in the entire Seventh Army.

Sword drawn, he opened the door.

The lantern light spilled into the room and over the well. One of the capstones was missing and the one next to it pulled out of line, the elongated print of wet fingers showing where the assassin had lost a precarious grip. Grinning, he lifted the lantern and moved in for a closer look, but the well was too deep

for his light to reach the water and the splashing had stopped.

A pair of shadows dropped silently down from the ledge of the old arch and disappeared into the fortress.

The Emperor wanted the situation resolved, and his orders had been explicit.

But they had to find the commander before they could kill her.

The bureaucracy in the capital had spit forth a plan of the fortress. It hadn't included the well room, but by the time Vree and Bannon reached the kitchens, they'd filled in the blanks. Skirting a pair of snoring bodies, they made their way to a patch of deep shadow at one edge of the open wall and stared across the courtyard. The Commander would be somewhere in the central tower.

While they'd been moving through the hill, the nearly full moon had dropped low in the sky, creating bars of light and dark between the buildings. Assassins' paths.

Useful. But they'd still have to waste time searching the tower. The search had likely killed Ganit. The longer it took to reach a target, the greater the odds of discovery.

Together? Bannon signed, looking annoyed.

Vree nodded. They'd lose most of the advantage they had over the previous three assassins if they separated.

They were about to move from kitchen to tower when a shadow separated from the top of the gatehouse. Then a second. Then a third. The three huge birds landed side by side, with no sound from feathers or daws, on a window ledge almost exactly halfway up the tower wall.

Vree felt Bannon clutch her arm, fingers digging into flesh. Ravens didn't fly at night.

The ravens had gone from the window when Vree and Bannon reached the commander's room. They'd left two bodies behind them, silently and efficiently dispatched when there'd been no other way to move on. Hiding the bodies had taken more time than the killing.

Commander Jolan's small room had been set up like a command tent, her bed shoved up against one wall, less important than the map table and the strategies planned on it. She slept with one hand thrown up over her head, the paler skin on the underside of her arm defining her place in the dark.

She wasn't alone.

A silent crossing from door to bedside. The edge of Vree's dagger slid through the soft tissue of the throat too quickly for pain, found the spine, slipped between two ridges of bone, and ended it.

The commander's companion was considerably younger, probably Bannon's age. He opened sleep-blurred eyes at exactly the wrong time.

Vree tossed a small square of leather stamped with a black starburst onto the bed. The Emperor's first order had been carried out and his point had been made. Treason could not hide from the blades of Jür.

Now, they had to get the barbican over the gate with only the soft shadows between moonset and dawn to hide them.

Bannon glanced out the window and grinned. "We take the high road," he said softly.

Measuring the distance between the window and broad top of the fortress' encircling wall, Vree nodded. The only guards were in the barbican. No point in wasting soldiers on a patrol when there was only one possible point of attack.

There was no room on the ledge to stand and jump. There was no room on the ledge for three ravens either but Vree didn't have time to worry about that now. She slid out, feet first, then gripping the ridge of stone, braced her feet against the wall, knees up beside her ears.

One breath, two...

Push off.

Turn in the air.

It had been a long night. She landed hard and too close to the edge. Training threw her weight back before her brain acknowledged the danger and sucking air between her teeth as her elbow slammed into stone, she rolled into the vee of shadow between wall and parapet.

Bannon's landing was messier still, but she grabbed his waistband and yanked him down beside her. He pillowed his head between her breasts, mouthed, "Quick nap?" then grinned at her expression.

They'd taken out a target, and that always left Ban-non a little giddy.

Vree jerked her head toward the gate. The night was nearly over.

There were four soldiers on guard.

They weren't expecting an attack from inside the fortress. Vree wondered what they thought when Ban-non walked in through the arched door overlooking the courtyard although she supposed the first two died too quickly to think anything. The third had her mouth open to cry warning, and the fourth actually got a hand around his sword hilt.

Commander Zayit watched a burning rag drop from the barbican and extinguish itself on the road. "Move them up," she said quietly to the Squad Leader beside her.

The order repeated itself, and the company crept forward. She could hear it creaking and rustling like a huge beast rolling over in its sleep.

When the second flame dropped, she stepped out where she could be seen in the pale dawn light and pulled her sword. "Now!"

"They're moving," Bannon announced, wiping oil off his fingers. "Good."

As Vree raised the inner gate, Bannon picked up a discarded crossbow. A rooster crowed.

Marshal Arnon rode into the fort when it was all over.

The traitors' bodies were stacked on one side of the courtyard, the dead of the Seventh Army on the other. A bloody rag tied around one arm and a smear of blood not her own over the front of her armor, Commander Zayit walked forward to meet him.

Vree braced the stiffening body of the guard against her shoulder and shuffled it forward. Still hidden behind the edge of the arched doorway, she paused and her fingers tightened on unresisting flesh.

The sun had laid the shadow of the barbican across the courtyard crowned by the impossibly darker

shadows of three ravens.

She met Bannon's gaze across the arch, and together they looked up.

The marshal's horse stopped at the edge of the ravens' shadow. Shied sideways when he spurred it, but wouldn't go any farther.

In the moment between one heartbeat and the next, the ravens screamed.

Marshal Arnon turned, one hand raised to block the sun from his eyes.

Bannon pulled the trigger on the crossbow.

The marshal jerked in the saddle, and began to fall, a crossbow quarrel buried deep in his left armpit.

Someone yelled, "There!"

An arrow hit the body Vree held.

She shoved it forward.

It hit the stones of the courtyard at the time same as the marshal.

The Emperor's orders had been explicit.

Throats slit in the night. Black starbursts left behind.

So many people never bothered thinking past the obvious.

Commander Zayit barely heard the beating of ravens' wings over the pounding of her heart. Then they landed, one, two, three by the marshal's body.

"Commander?"

Without knowing why, she looked up. Past the traitor's body broken on the ground, up to where black shadows moved back out of the light. And she remembered another broken body that had lain like a shadow on the road.

"Commander?"

Some urgency in the question now. The fortress was so quiet, she could hear the impact of a heavy beak through flesh.

Marshal Arnon had been right.

The Emperor had taken care of it.

"Let them feed."