

COVENANT  
of  
BLOOD

Book 1 of the Thayria Cycle

H.R. van Adel



# HELLEBAARD

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*With thanks to the alphas and betas:*

*Steve*

*Meg*

*J.C.*

*Eleanor*

*Diana James*

*This one is for the boys*

*It's for the girls too, a little bit, but mostly it's for the boys*

## PROLOGUE

### NO. 18 GARRISON COMPANY

### SARASINIAN OCCUPIED AHRENIA

### NEAR HERENA

Goraric stumbled over yet another tree root. “Shit,” he muttered, almost dropping his spear. “Fucking goat tracks. We should build proper roads out here.”

Beside him, Ostolaza snorted. “Nah. Waste of time.”

“How d’you reckon?”

“Because there’s nothing out here worth building a road to?”

“That’s not true.” Goraric wiped away a bead of sweat as it ran down his nose. “And it’d make our lives easier at times like this, wouldn’t it?”

“Times like this happen once a year, mate. Not worth the effort.”

“Oh I dunno,” said Goraric, peering into the forest. Northern trees were something else. Harder than iron, knitted tighter than a shield wall, and with twisty little pathways and hidden alcoves that harboured all manner of threats. He shivered. And it was cold in the woods, too. Far colder than seemed natural. “Reckon some decent roads would improve things no end.”

Ostolaza shrugged again. “Nah. Lot o’ work for no real gain.”

“Well it wouldn’t hurt to thin all this shit out a bit, surely?”

“Can’t say I don’t agree with you there, mate. Forest like this is an ambusher’s wet dream.” He gestured around them. “Them Ahren could be hiding anywhere out there, just waiting.”

Goraric looked at Ostolaza. “*Them Ahren?* What’s that supposed to mean, exactly?”

“Nothing,” said Ostolaza with a grimace. “I meant the forest folk, that’s all,” he added hastily. “Not you and yours. You’re all right.”

“We’re *all right?* Wow, thanks.”

“Look, I didn’t mean anything by it...”

“And this *isn’t* an ambusher’s wet dream, by the way,” said Goraric, wanting to get back to their original topic. “Our scouts would find ‘em first.”

“Scouts?” Ostolaza gestured around them. “In this? Nah. Forest is too thick, mate. They’d get lost.”

Never mind the tree roots, this time Goraric nearly tripped over his own feet. “What? You saying we don’t have scouts out?”

“Yep.”

“You’re fuckin’ with me, right?”

“Nope.” Ostolaza shook his head.

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

Goraric’s face fell. “We got a van *and* a rear out, but. I know for a fact we do.”

“Yeah, but so what? Fat lot o’ good they’ll be, brother. Might give us a moment’s warning if they come up against something nasty, maybe, but no more than that.”

“That can’t be right...”

“Think I’m fuckin’ with ya?” asked Ostolaza, rubbing his chin. “I’m really not, mate. And it’s actually our sides I’d be more worried about. I mean, with no scouts we got no way to screen ‘em, eh? We’d never see a flank attack coming. And if the enemy attacked from *both* sides, which of course they would... You know what I’m saying? We couldn’t even form up properly ‘cause we just don’t have the room. We’re walking two or three abreast on this track here, all strung out an’ whatnot, so...”

“Shit,” said Goraric, seeing the ambush unfold in his mind’s eye. He could almost feel the enemy bursting from their hiding places, practically hear the din of combat and the cries of dying men. “It would be a slaughter.” This line of conversation had been a mistake; now he wouldn’t even be able to look at shadows without imagining them hiding some mortal danger. He shivered and tried to shrug deeper into his coat. Was it just him, or had the forest somehow grown even colder?

“Yep.”

“That’s not good.”

“Nope.”

“Soldier Goraric!” shouted Sergeant Maximo from somewhere down their column.

Goraric straightened, readying himself for what was coming. “Yes, sergeant?”

“Shut the fuck up!”

“Yes, sergeant!” Hmm, that wasn’t so bad. He’d been expecting a bit more than a mild dressing-down.

Maximo raised his voice so the entire company could hear. “This area is completely pacified. There will be no ambush today or any other day. And even if there was, we would fight and we would bloody well win. We are soldiers of the Sarasinian League! We fight, we win! Every. Fucking. Time. Say it, all of you! We fight, we win!”

“We fight, we win!” shouted the men.

“*Bullshit!*” bellowed Maximo. “Louder! We fight, we win!”

“We fight, we win!”

“*Pathetic!* Use your fucking balls! We fight, we win!”

“*We fight, we win!*”

“*Again!*”

“*We fight, we win!*”

“Better!” Maximo actually sounded pleased. A few moments went by. “Soldier Goraric!”

Goraric’s heart sank. “Yes, sergeant?”

“You have extra duties for two months.”

“Yes, sergeant!” And he swore as well, albeit internally.

“You stupid cock hole!”

“Yes, sergeant!”

“And you’ll wear a woman’s dress until further notice.”

“Yes, sergeant!” He swore internally again.

“Soldier Ostolaza?”

“Yes, sergeant?” shouted Ostolaza.

“The same goes for you.”

“Yes, sergeant!”

“Dickhead.”

“Yes, sergeant!”

“Balezentis!” roared Maximo. “Where are you?”

Balezentis raised his spear. “Here, sergeant!”

“Five lashes, corporal, and you’re demoted too, since you can’t seem to keep your men’s lips from flapping worse than a fucking sewing circle.”

“Yes, sergeant!”

“Flog bag.” Maximo looked around. “Abbadessa!” he barked, even though the man was no more than a few paces from him. “You’re the new unit leader. Congratulations, corporal. Don’t fuck up and you’ll keep your stripes.”

“Yes, Sergeant!” yelled Abbadessa. “I won’t!”

“Yeah,” said Maximo with a grunt. “We’ll see.”

Goranic glanced back over his shoulder. Lieutenant Clopius seemed preoccupied with scanning the forest, but he saw Captain Lamela reward Maximo’s efforts with a perfunctory nod. He looked away again before either of them noticed him—he was in enough trouble as it was.

The company marched in silence from then on, if the *tramp tramp* of a hundred and six pairs of boots pummelling the earth could be called silence. Goranic was still wondering where he was going to find a dress when a flock of birds suddenly took to the air.

“Fuck!” muttered someone.

“Halt!” bellowed Lamela, drawing his sword. “*Shield wall! Ready arms!*”

Men dropped into fighting stances, shields overlapping and weapons poised to strike. The forest was still, however, and it stayed that way. Not a leaf rustled; there wasn’t even the slightest breeze. Goranic’s heart pounded against his ribcage so hard he was sure everyone could hear it.



*“Shoulder arms, forward march!”* cried Lamela, and the company set off again.

An hour or two later, the van came back to report having reached the end of the track. When the company finally swapped the gloomy forest for daylight, Goraric felt his spirits lift and gave silent thanks to Owic for the wide patch of wet, black earth that greeted them. Flies buzzed, and the stink of rotting vegetables made him want to pinch his nose. On the other side of the patch, Ahren villagers were loading turnips into a cart. It was a bit late in the season for harvesting, he’d have thought, but then again he’d never been much of a farmer. No doubt they knew their business better than he did.

*“Rally!”* bawled Lamela. *“Shield wall!”*

The company echoed his orders. A wall of shields sprang up, thirty men across, armour and spear points gleaming in the sun.

*“Ready arms!”*

The villagers ran for their weapons and gathered around their turnip cart. They outnumbered the company, but with nothing but rough spun clothes and shoddy spears, Goraric doubted they posed any real threat. He picked out a few vaguely familiar faces and prayed that no one would recognise him. Few folk from these parts joined Sarasinian units; he just wasn’t in the mood for being called a traitor or otherwise further insulted.

After conferring with Clopius, Lamela strode over to the villagers, his empty right palm raised to show he came in peace. Goraric noticed how he still kept a firm grip on his shield with his left, though. One should never be too trusting.

*“Does anyone here speak Sarasinian?”* asked the captain.

There was no reply.

*“I asked,”* said Lamela, louder, *“if anyone here speaks Sarasinian? Anyone at all?”*

Still no reply.

*“No? No one? Fetch someone who does, then. Eh? Fetch someone for me to talk to before things get nasty!”*

The villagers shrugged their shoulders and muttered amongst themselves. A young boy peeled away from the crowd, presumably given the task of bringing someone to translate for

the captain. Goraric shook his head. He could have translated for him, the fool. Had the man forgotten or had he overlooked him on purpose?

“You really should learn to speak our language,” Lamela told the Ahren. “It would make things easier for us all, don’t you think?” But they just stood there, looking at him with barely concealed revulsion. He returned their glares for a while, then spat and rejoined his men.

They waited on a patch of grass near the villagers’ turnip cart. His comrades grumbled, but Goraric was content to bask in the light and warmth of early spring. Nine tenths of soldiering was waiting around for orders anyway, so you may as well make the most of it. He found a turnip on the ground. Someone had pared away the greens, and it tasted less like a vegetable and more like a stick. He threw it away.

Eventually a woman appeared. She was no ordinary villager, for she wore a white, flowing dress and a belt of golden discs cinched tightly about her waist. Young, slender and auburn-haired, and with an intricate mask of black leather that covered her nose and mouth, she strode across the clearing as straight-backed as a queen. The soldiers of Number Eighteen Garrison Company immediately perked up. They murmured their appreciation as she drew near, and someone even let out a raucous catcall that drew laughter.

Goraric blinked. In addition to her finery, the woman wore a mantle of smoky silver that emitted a low hum as it writhed and coiled about her shoulders. “Owic protect us,” he said, swallowing. A witch! He felt as if his bowels were about to open.

The witch ignored the farmers, making directly for the company. Lamela intercepted her, and Goraric was horrified when a thin tendril of not-smoke uncoiled lazily toward him. The captain obviously couldn’t see it, because otherwise he’d have run screaming in the opposite direction. He looked around him. Was everyone else blind to it as well?

“Do you speak Sarasinian?” Lamela asked her.

“I do,” said the witch, casting an eye over the company.

“Do you have a name?”

“Yes. What do you want, captain?”

“Straight to the point, eh?” The captain grinned. “Fair enough. As I’m sure you know, we’ve come for the tribute.”

“Tribute?”

“Ah,” said Lamela, craning his neck in an attempt to make eye contact with her. He failed. “Trib-ute?” He spoke slowly and deliberately, as if speaking to a stupid child. “You know? Trib-ute? The tax? Mon-ey?”

“I know what ‘tribute’ means, captain.” She sounded bored.

“Well, good!” said Lamela, slapping his shield with his free hand. “Good! That’ll make things a bit easier then, eh? So, whom do I talk to about it? Is there a chief or a headman around here, or what?”

“You can speak to me.”

Lamela grunted. “You? Really? *You* have authority here?”

“I do.”

Goranic saw the witch’s eyes flicker toward the tree line behind the company. Lamela must have too, since he paused to glance over his shoulder. He soon turned to face her again, so there can’t have been anything interesting going on back there. Just to be sure, though, he took a quick look himself. Nothing.

Lamela squinted. “I didn’t know you Ahren had woman chiefs.”

“I venture there’s much you don’t know about us, captain.”

She was a bold one, this witch. Goranic’s unease grew. He sensed that she was dangerous, but Lamela and his company weren’t exactly harmless either. If she were a match for a hundred spears he didn’t know, but if so, he hoped Lamela didn’t force a confrontation.

“All right,” said Lamela, shrugging. At least her words hadn’t provoked him to anger. “Well, we’re here for the annual tribute, so let’s get on with it, then.” He turned and waggled his fingers. Number Eighteen’s accountant, Camius, scurried over to hold open his ledger of dog-eared pages. The captain gave the thing a hasty glance. “It says here that last year... your, er, people... paid us a dozen milk cows.”

“Did they indeed?”

“Yes,” said Lamela, scrutinising the ledger. “It’s written here quite clearly—last year they paid a dozen milk cows.”

“And?”

“Well it’s a new tax year, isn’t it? Time to pay again. I wouldn’t be here otherwise, would I?”

The witch turned to address the villagers. Goraric struggled a little with her dialect, but understood enough to know she was asking about the previous tax year. He watched, entranced, as her magic twisted and crackled around her. “Can you not see that?” he asked Ostolaza.

“See what?” asked Ostolaza, looking at him sideways.

“Nothing.” So, he was the only one who could see it? Why? What did that mean, exactly? A thousand other questions sprang to mind, but with no way of finding answers, his options were limited. Better to just pretend he couldn’t see anything out of the ordinary. One word about witches or magic would almost certainly cause panic amongst the men. To say nothing of how the witch might react.

“Your records are correct,” the witch told Lamela.

“Oh, and thank you so much for that.” The captain’s voice was heavy with sarcasm. “We’re expecting the same again this year, obviously.”

“You’re not the tax collectors they dealt with last year.”

“So?”

“So, they don’t see why they should have to give *you* anything.”

Lamela threw back his head and laughed. “It doesn’t matter! We’re Sarasinians and you’re not. You’re our subjects, remember? It doesn’t matter if it’s my company out here or some other one. You pay what you owe. That’s how this whole tribute thing works.”

“These people don’t recognise your men, captain,” said the witch, shaking her head. “And they especially don’t like that purple shield of yours.”

The commander looked at his shield. “So? Did you not hear what I fucking said just now? I don’t care what they like or don’t like. Not my concern! They must pay.”

“Or?”

Lamela bristled. “Or?! Let me tell you something, lady—I am Captain Depietro Lamela, and no one refuses me anything. I’ll take my dozen cows *and* whatever else I want. Say no to me and I swear by the gods I’ll kill your men and take this fucking turnip cart for myself. Then I’ll find your village—it can’t be far—and burn it to the ground, and then I’ll take all the women and boys back to sell in the slave markets in Herena!”

No reply.

“Go on, tell that to your people!”

The witch did as she was told. The villagers reacted with anger. Lamela, no doubt very aware of how far he was from the safety of his company, seemed to be bracing for a fight. Goraric wondered if the people, emboldened by the presence of their witch, would give him one.

Luckily, nothing happened. Though clearly pissed off, no one seemed inclined to violence at least, and Lamela gave his company no orders. The witch seemed content to let her people vent. It was as if she were hearing them, but not actually listening.

“They don’t like it, eh?” said Lamela, not trying to disguise his delight.

“One moment, captain,” said the witch. She turned to address the crowd, which fell silent as soon as she opened her mouth. Lamela shamelessly ogled her arse while she spoke.

As before, Goraric didn’t catch every word, but he got the gist of her message: she was asking for their patience and continued trust. He wondered what that meant. From what he could make of her tone, it certainly sounded suspicious. He looked around, half expecting to see a warband creeping up behind them, but there was nothing except trees.

“So?” Lamela’s hand brushed the hilt of his sword. “What’s it to be?”

The witch turned back to him. “You can have your milk cows.”

Goraric’s unease grew. The witch was up to no good, he could feel it. Should he say something to Lamela? What, though? Not to trust her? He doubted the captain needed such advice. No, better to say nothing. And he was in enough trouble for talking out of turn already.

“Good,” said Lamela, nodding. “Sensible. I’ll take them. And something else.”

“Something else?”

“Absolutely!” he said with a boyish grin. “More words with you.” His tongue brushed the corner of his mouth as his eyes lingered on her narrow hips. “I fear I haven’t introduced myself properly, and you never told me your name.”

“Mm.”

“You do have a name, don’t you?”

“Of course.”

“Then what is it?” He reached for her hand but she evaded him. Goraric thought he saw one of the villagers wince at his failed effort. “Fair enough, but the least you could do is look at me. Or are you so shy?”

The witch shook her head. “No.”

“No? What do you mean?”

“Where I’m from, captain, it’s considered unseemly to stare too long at a member of the opposite sex unless you’re married to them.”

“Pfft. Can’t say as I see the harm in it myself.”

“No doubt.”

“But you do have a name?”

The witch nodded. “I already said I did.”

“Well then what is it? Or is it considered unseemly to tell me?”

“Not particularly.”

“So then, out with it.” The captain’s tone said he was growing tired of their verbal sparring.

“It’s considered unseemly of you to ask.”

Lamela made a braying sound. “Fuck me. You Ahren certainly have strange customs, don’t you?”

“Strange to you, perhaps.”

“Oh, they’re strange all right. And this little mask of yours, then?” asked Lamela, pointing. “Your muzzle? What’s that about, eh? I thought they were just for warriors.”

The witch shook her head. “Not always.”

“But only fighters wear them, yes? So, you’re a fighter, then?” He gestured at her in a way that suggested he found the idea of a warrior woman amusing. “Little slip of a thing like you? What

weapon do you favour? No, don't tell me... great axe? I bet it's the great axe, isn't it?" He chuckled at his own joke.

"I'm no fighter."

"Then what are you?"

The witch finally lifted her chin and met the captain's gaze. "Something else."

Goraric's mouth fell open as her magic flared.

\* \* \*

"Unh," said Lamela, blinking. He could feel the barbarian woman's mind sliding around inside his skull. Instinct said to resist, to push her out, but the attempt hurt so badly it made him want to throw up. His vision swam.

*His mother cooing softly in the darkness, urging him to sleep.*

*The older boys ambushing him, and how he'd pretended to hand over the knife. The look on the leader's face as the blade disappeared into his guts.*

*The soft, salty lips of the first girl he ever kissed.*

*Becoming a soldier, and swinging a sword in anger.*

*His promotion to captain.*

*Laughing on his wedding day, even if the prospect of bedding his new bride made his knees shake harder than they ever had in the shield wall.*

*Overwhelming joy at the birth of his son.*

*Tears falling as he laid flowers on his wife's grave. The plague had taken her a week before he got back from campaign. He'd wept like a baby, and didn't care who saw.*

*Watching the whore take her last breath. He hadn't meant to hurt her. It was almost as if someone else had been controlling his hands.*

He looked up at the barbarian woman. Up? Not down, though she was shorter by a head? How was that even possible? But the thought died as quickly as it surfaced, gone back into his skull as if it had never existed. Her blue eyes reminded him of... something. He almost remembered what. He tried to reflect on that, but then abruptly lost his train of thought.

"Depietro!"

"Huh?" said Lamela, spinning around. Who amongst his men had the balls to call him by his first name? But there was no one there—the Eighteenth had apparently vanished! He turned back,

expecting to see the woman and the barbarians, but they weren't there either. He suppressed a rising wave of panic. Even the forest and the stinking turnip patch seemed to have disappeared, replaced by a grassy hill surrounded by meadowlands. What in the name of fuck was going on?

"Depietro!"

The voice was softer this time, as if coming from a long way away. From his vantage point on the hill, he could make out a city in the distance. A great city with a wide, paved road leading to it. A city not like any place he'd seen before. The buildings were foreign and definitely not Sarasinian. There was no one for miles around, either. Very strange, because no matter the country, a road like that should be thick with travellers at this time of day.

Come to think of it, the air was oddly stagnant. He felt no breeze on his cheek, nor could he hear birds chirruping or insects humming in the grass. "Am I dreaming?" he asked aloud. Yes. Yes, that must be it! He was dreaming. That made sense. And it made some of his worry leave him, too.

"Depietro!"

The voice again. It seemed to be coming from the other side of the hill. He clambered to the top and there, on the opposite slope about halfway down, he saw something jutting out of the ground. He hurried to the spot and started digging with his fingers. The work was slow, and the more dirt he scooped away the faster his heart beat. Finally he lifted an old helm out of the hill, half rusted, with a skull embedded between its hinged cheek pieces. He found a maker's mark stamped into the iron, and it was one he knew well. He took off his own helm so he could compare the two side by side.

"Depietro!" screamed the skull. This time the voice was his!

"Waah!" he cried, flinching. He recoiled in horror, tripping over his boots and nearly rolling down the hill. "It's just a dream. It's just a dream!"

\* \* \*

Goranic broke into a cold sweat. The witch obviously had Lamela under some sort of spell. He said as much to Ostolaza.



But Ostolaza didn't reply. He just stood there, every bit glassy-eyed and unresponsive as the captain.

"Oh shit," said Goraric, looking around. The witch had ensorcelled *the entire company!* He looked again for the warband that must surely be encircling them by now, and again he didn't find it. And then it hit him—the witch hardly needed warriors. Even farmers with sticks could make short work of defenceless enemies. He thought about running for the forest and leaving his companions to their fate. But before he could do anything, Lamela and everyone else apparently snapped back to reality.

"Did you say something?" asked Ostolaza, tapping his arm.

"Uh," said Goraric, not sure how to reply. He couldn't remember. "Maybe? No? I dunno..."

"What the fu—?" said the captain, blinking.

"Your cows," said the witch. She spoke calmly, nothing in her bearing suggesting anything unusual was afoot, nor had been. "They're here."

But like Goraric, Lamela seemed to know better. He looked about, bewildered. "What? Where did I—?"

"Breathe, captain."

"But I was—? I saw—?"

"Forget it. Breathe."

"Huh?"

"Relax," she said. Her voice was gentle, entrancing. Perhaps infused with magic. "Forget, captain. Breathe."

"Yes," said Lamela, inhaling deeply. "Of course."

"Just breathe, and then ask me about the tribute."

"Ah, yes," said Lamela, and he took another breath. "So, about the tribute, then? What—?"

"Over there." The witch pointed.

The villagers parted to reveal nine of the saddest, skinniest looking cows Goraric had ever seen. Not twelve as requested. Just nine! And they were so old they looked more like oversized goats. He scanned the witch's face. Her eyes twinkled—was she smiling beneath that mask?

"What's the meaning of this?" asked Lamela, looking at the animals with distaste.

"Is there a problem, captain?"

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