

chapter one

The young woman blinked and squinted as she turned the corner out of the shadow of the buildings into bright sunlight. She paused a moment to catch her breath and get her bearings. Someone bumped into her from behind and she stumbled. The offender offered a brief apology in French before hurrying on and the woman shrugged as she looked out over the Marseilles harbour.

"Now, which way was it?" she muttered, looking up and down the harbourfront before catching sight of a landmark she recognised. "Ah, there we are." She headed off down the street at a near jog, wincing as she looked at her watch. *Damn, Ally, you are so late.*

She felt sweat beginning to soak her shirt as she dodged around other pedestrians and winced again internally. She cast a wistful glance at the other women on the street, many of whom were outfitted in the unofficial uniform of southern France: tight shorts and the briefest of bikini tops — if that. Ally blushed at one woman wearing even less. Yeesh. Still, that looks a lot cooler than what I'm wearing. She looked down at her own T-shirt and mid-thigh shorts. *The ultimate in geek chic.* She pushed her glasses farther up her nose, continuing to rub her hand through short brown hair. *At least I don't have a bunch of pens in my pocket.*

Dodging her way through the crowd, Ally finally recognised the café that was her destination. Catching sight of the person she was going to meet, she eased her way through the tables and into a seat opposite, relieved that the umbrella overhead was providing some shade. "Hey, Chorus," she said as the stocky man looked up, smiling. "Sorry I'm late."

"Ally, hi." The young man grinned, his teeth brilliantly white in his very dark face. "Don't worry about it. *Ga gona mathatha.*"

"Yeah, one of the showers at the hostel broke just after you left. And, of course, then everyone wanted to shower. And there's also a whole lot of activity on the streets for some reason."

"I was talking to our waiter and he said that there's some VIP showing up today. The Crown Princess of Atlantis, I think he said. Or Atlantl, if you want to use their own term."

"Oh yeah, I heard something about that," Ally said. "Going to *le Centre de la Vieille Charité*, I think. It's a museum."

Chorus nodded at her French. "Not bad, Ally. *Ton accent s'améliore.*" Ally looked blank. "Your accent's improving," he translated. He looked up as the waiter approached. "So, what would you like?"

"*Un croissant, s'il vous plaît,*" Ally requested. "*Et un...thé glacé?*"

"*Et pour moi...*" Chorus rattled off a long series of instructions in French while Ally scowled.

"I hate it when you do that," she complained. "It's not fair. Anywhere we go, we're there two weeks and you can talk like a native. You're a freak, you know that, right?"

Chorus' eyebrows rose. "Hey, it took me three weeks to learn Thai! Besides, you're one to talk, *zarbi!* Just because I'm a Savant—"

"Idiot savant," came the muttered interjection.

"—there's no reason to be insulting. Besides, would you wanna trade?"

This question inspired an emphatic headshake.

"Good, then shut up. So, what do you think? Do you want to go visit a museum? I read that the one the princess is visiting has a really good exhibit. And, hey, if we get there around noon, we'll be in a position to ogle some royalty. It'll do you some good to fantasise about being some princess' knight in shining armour, *chérie.*"

Alleandre looked uncomfortable. "I dunno if I want to go ogling right now. I mean, Annie—"

"Damn it, fuck Annie. Or don't fuck Annie. *She* broke up with *you*. By phone. While you were on the other side of the planet from her, no less. She's not the centre of your life any more. Now, you *are* going to come with me to this museum." Chorus pointed at her commandingly. "Ogling is optional."

Alleandre dragged a hand through her hair. "Okay, okay, I'll go! What's '*zarbi*', anyway?"

"Weirdo."

"Gee, thanks."

Colonel Sir Arthur Ramirez, Knight of the Temple and Master of the Heir's Guard, was not happy. Partly, this was due to physical discomfort. Someone — who was going to be looking for a new job, and possibly a new head, once Sir Arthur found out who it was — had misplaced both Sir Arthur's custom-fitted body armour *and* his backup. So the Master had been forced to borrow a set belonging to Corporal Ariman Tresca.

Corporal Tresca was a massively built black man whose head and shoulders tended to brush the edges of any doorway he walked through. Unfortunately, while Sir Arthur lacked over a foot of Tresca's height, he actually had to turn sideways to get his shoulders through doorways. And so Sir Arthur had the uncomfortable sensation of being squeezed, rather like a large tube of toothpaste.

However, eighteen years in the Imperial Marines and another thirteen in the Atlantlan Guard had trained him to ignore the mere physical discomfort and concentrate on the primary cause of his unhappiness.

“Eagle Three, this is Anthill, report status, over.” Sir Arthur cupped his hand over his ear in an attempt to hear the voice coming through his earbud.

“... gle Th...Sa...gain...er.”

Sir Arthur directed a glare around his command centre, a medium-sized room in the *Hôtel Delcourt*. “Someone talk to me. Why can’t I hear Eagle Three? Dicky, is it hardware?”

Major Theodora “Dicky” Nixon, a rail-thin dark-haired woman, who nevertheless was one of the only people who could take down Sir Arthur hand-to-hand on a semi-regular basis, replied, “Negative, sir. I checked everything myself. Whatever it is has taken out Three’s primary and *both* backups. It’s either a bug in the decryption software on our end, or something’s jamming us.” She shrugged. “Jalal is checking the computer now.”

“Well, tell him to hurry up. We’re scheduled to move in ten, and if—”

“I’ve got it, sir,” Corporal Tresca rumbled. His commander spun to face him as he pointed to a map of Marseilles on his computer screen. “It’s the building, sir. It uses a dedicated-frequency radio transmitter on the roof to communicate with another office across town, and its transmission frequency is almost smack in the centre of our bandwidth. Sniper Team Three’s almost sitting on the antenna.”

Sir Arthur exploded. “Goddammit, why didn’t anyone catch this before? When I find out who—” He stopped and visibly gathered himself. “Too late now. We don’t have time.” The bodyguard turned to his second in command. “Dicky, contact Eagle Two. They have line of sight with Three. Tell them to go visual. Eagle Three is now under condition Red One.”

Major Nixon’s eyes widened, but she nodded and began speaking quietly but clearly into her radio. Condition Red One would allow the two-man sniper team to fire on any target that both members considered an imminent lethal threat, without reference to command. This was not a responsibility to be given lightly, especially on foreign soil. Still, Sir Arthur trusted the judgement of all the people under his command.

He was already issuing more orders. “Tresca, shut down that transmitter. Call the building, call the management, get them to turn it off. Cut their power lines if you have to.”

As Corporal Tresca reached for the phone, Sir Arthur tried to sigh deeply, but was prevented by the constricting mass of the too-small body armour under his silver and purple uniform. He settled for rolling his shoulders, eliciting an alarming series of creaks and groans from the already-stressed material. “I’m off to meet the princess. This had better be all that goes wrong today.”

On the roof of a tall building overlooking *le Centre de la Vieille Charité*, a black-clad figure cradling a powerful scope-equipped rifle watched carefully as a light flashed from Eagle Two’s position on top of the building across the street. After counting the flashes and decoding their meaning, he turned to his companion, and said, “They’ve given us Red One authorisation.” He then used his own signal light to flash a confirmation back to Eagle Two.

His companion nodded solemnly before switching her gaze back to the street below.

Behind them, the bodies of Sergeant Abdul al-Latif and Corporal Miroslav Garner, Royal Atlantlan Heir’s Guard, the two-man sniper team codenamed Eagle Three, lay cooling on the rooftop.

Evelynne Sophia al-Heru deMolay, Crown Princess of Atlantis, stood in the high vaulted lobby of the *Hôtel Delcourt*, and looked longingly at the bright sunshine out the huge floor-to-ceiling windows that fronted the hotel. Maïda, her lady-in-waiting, had been briefly called away to deal with some minor catastrophe involving flowers and seating arrangements. The bulk of Evelynne’s Personal Guard had yet to arrive, so she stood alone daydreaming in the middle of the floor while a large number of people did the million-and-one last minute things that needed doing.

Only ten more days. Hooray. I wish it were over now. Oh well, suck it up, Princess, as Patrick says. Once this is over you can go to the Summer Palace and sunbathe for a week. She caught a glimpse of herself in one of the mirrors lining the lobby and was torn between resignation and appreciation over her appearance.

A mass of flame-red hair had been elaborately coifed into a pile on top of her head. Several jewelled pins held it in place and Evelynne knew from experience that nothing short of a tornado would ruin Maïda’s masterpiece. Not even the weight of the coronet that Evelynne had been legally entitled to wear since her recent nineteenth birthday.

Below the hair, both almond-shaped eyes, a legacy of Evelynne’s Egyptian grandmother, took in the full effect. Her lightly tanned face was surprisingly free of freckles, another gift from her grandmother. Brilliant blue eyes were currently surrounded by a heavy layer of kohl designs, more to hide the dark rings of fatigue under them than for any real desire for makeup. Her lips were covered in an equally dark shade of kohl, with small designs at the corners of her mouth, which gave the impression of a quirk of a smile. Below the face, a dark blue dress started at the shoulders, showing just a hint of cleavage, and ran down to the ankle, and though Evelynne’s genius of a tailor had assured her that it would be as comfortable as possible to walk in, she was still dreading the prospect. Still, aesthetically Evelynne had to admit the arrangement was quite pleasing.

Isis, only ten more days, she repeated to herself like a mantra. Only ten more days. I wonder if I can convince them to skip the Switzerland trip. Even as she thought it, she knew it would never happen. Both the diplomatic considerations and her own sense of duty would ensure that she finished the tour with grace.

A sound behind her made Evelynne look back, and she saw Colonel Ramirez coming towards her. As he walked determinedly in her direction, a path through the throng spontaneously opened, and in no time the bodyguard arrived at Evelynne's side.

"Sir Arthur," Evelynne said gravely.

"Your Highness," Sir Arthur responded, just as gravely.

There was silence for several seconds, as they both stood there solemnly.

Evelynne cracked first, as usual. Her lips twisted in an effort to control herself, an attempt doomed to fail as a very un-princess-like snort erupted from her chest, followed by a giggle. It took her a few minutes to regain her composure. "Goodness, I needed that. Thanks, Uncle Arthur," she said, around a few extra giggles that managed to escape. She sighed. "I was trying to get Maïda to go to this thing in my place, but she refused. Could you please arrest her as a traitor to the Crown, or some such thing?"

Sir Arthur's mouth had quirked into a hint of a wry smile. "Somehow I think people would notice that the Heir had suddenly aged forty years overnight, Your Highness. However, I understand how you feel. This trip has not been easy on me, either." He grimaced, thinking about his most recent troubles, and Evelynne winced in sympathy with him, knowing that however hard this was on her, it was ten times harder on those in charge of her security. "As for Maïda — oh dear, I expect we're leaving now," he said. "No time for any arresting at the moment, I'm afraid."

Evelynne scowled at her bodyguard, until Maïda's voice came suddenly from behind her, making her jump. "Don't frown, Highness, you'll ruin my makeup. What did Sir Arthur do now?" The short, motherly woman looked at her charge disapprovingly.

"He's been showing his disloyalty by refusing to arrest you. And what do you mean, 'your makeup'? It's on *my* face!"

"Yes, Highness, but I'm the one who put it there. Therefore, it is my makeup. You may keep your face."

More than one attendant was somewhat shocked as they heard the princess mumbling about "traitors", "dissidents" and "beheadings" as she was escorted towards the car.

"You've never been to Atlantis, have you?" Chorus asked as he and his friend walked along the busy street.

"No," Ally replied, looking up from where she was searching through her fanny pack. "I didn't think you had."

"No, I haven't. I'd like to visit some day. I'd love to learn Lantlan. It sounds similar to Xhosa or San. All those clicks and glottal stops. And have you heard them do that whistling thing? It sounds so exotic."

"Well, maybe once we've done with Europe we can head there from Portugal. Or maybe go to Egypt first and head across North Africa and leave from Morocco." Finally discovering the lip balm she was looking for, Ally paused a moment to apply the cinnamon-scented substance. The tall woman held out the fanny pack to her friend. "Would you mind putting this in your backpack? I'm getting way too sweaty carrying it."

Chorus took the item and placed it in his pack. "So, that's why you're sweaty, eh? And here I thought it was all the scantily clad females everywhere around here," he teased, receiving a baleful glare. "Really, Ally, you're way too — what's the word? Uptight. You need to get laid, badly."

Alleandre avoided his gaze as she blushed furiously. "Why would I want to get laid badly? I'd rather be laid goodly," she rallied valiantly, though the effort was spoiled by the ever-deepening colour of her face.

Chorus' eyebrows rose. "What's this? Was that a sex joke I heard coming from your lips? Will wonders never cease? You've been corrupted, Ally." Seeing her red cheeks, he decided to let up a bit. "Well, it does you good."

"Say, isn't the museum down there?" Ally asked in an effort to change the subject, indicating a street just ahead.

Chorus allowed her. "I think so. Look at all the people." The streets had been getting steadily more crowded and the police presence was becoming more obvious. "I guess the Europeans just love royals, eh?" He looked at his watch. "Yeah, they should be coming along any time now. Come on, let's see how close we can get."

Evelynne sat back in her seat as the car was driven slowly down the street and she waved to the crowds lining the sidewalks as she passed. The sun was shining brightly from overhead, although air conditioning kept the car cool.

"Explain the logic behind this car to me again, please," she requested out of the corner of her mouth, speaking to Sir Arthur, who was sitting in the front passenger seat. "This is a convertible. Convertibles should be, by definition, open to the air. Not enclosed in a bubble. I feel like I'm in a fishbowl. Do you want to see my goldfish impression?" Her eyes never left the crowds and the smile never left her face. It was at times like this that she wondered whether she had any other expressions.

"Please, Your Highness," replied her bodyguard. "It's policy when travelling through foreign nations." His tone was distracted. There was something nagging at the back of his mind, and he was trying to isolate what it was. It was like trying to remember a name on the tip of the tongue; no matter how hard he tried, it wouldn't come.

"Anthill, this is Crown. Status report," he murmured into the mike sewn into the collar of his uniform.

Major Nixon replied, "Crown, Anthill. All units report green. Exception: Eagle Three. They are still silent in condition Red One. Tresca is in contact with the office building and estimates shutdown of the transmitter in two minutes. Auxiliary units report ready."

“Understood, Anthill. We’re approaching the museum now.” He frowned and then decided to trust his instinct. “Anthill, I am authorising an increase of one alert level, across the board.”

Back in the command post, Major Nixon and Corporal Tresca looked at each other across the room. They were both long-time members of the Colonel’s command, and had learned to trust his hunches. Still, there was protocol to follow. “Crown, this is Anthill. Confirm Alert Plus One All.”

“Confirm Alert Plus One All, Anthill. I’ve got a feeling.”

The car slowed even further as it pulled up in front of *le Centre de la Vieille Charité*, an old stone building that had once been a hospice and now housed an excellent museum of Mediterranean history. Evelynne sighed as she looked out of her rolling fishbowl at the group of people waiting to greet her at the top of the stairs and resisted the urge to curl her mouth into a set of fish lips. “Well, here we go again,” she sighed.

Sir Arthur smiled at his charge in the rear view mirror. “Here we go again, Your Highness.” He spoke one last time into his mike, “Crown is exiting the vehicle.”

“Well, we’re definitely getting close,” Chorus commented. “Come on, let’s try to get just a little nearer,” he suggested, keeping a grip on Alleandre’s hand. Not that she really needed him to help her through the mass of people, he reminded himself, but old habits died hard.

The crowd, while peaceful, was still enthusiastic, which made for a steadily increasing concentration in both density and energy. The police manning the barricades remained alert, though the spectators were well behaved.

Suddenly the two friends found themselves against a barricade, mere feet from the road and less than fifteen metres from the steps of the museum. “Wow, this is great!” enthused Chorus. “We can see everything from here!” He turned a suspicious gaze on his companion.

Ally noticed. “Hey, I didn’t do anything,” she protested. “We’re just lucky to get this spot. Honest.”

Chorus looked sceptical, but decided to take her at her word. “Look,” he said, pointing up the street. He almost had to shout over the noise of enthusiastic onlookers, to which was now added the wail of approaching police sirens. “I think that’s them.”

Sure enough, behind an escort of three police motorcycles, a blue convertible rolled into view, bearing the white and blue flag and golden ankh of Atlantis and surrounded by six people in blue uniforms, five men and a woman who jogged alongside the car as it moved. Unlike a real convertible, however, the car was fitted with a plexiglass canopy within which three people were sitting. The driver was dressed in a smart blue uniform and looked decidedly military, though his face was unremarkable. The other man in the front seat was very distinctive, with a body shaped as though some god had taken an ordinary man and then pushed down on his head so that he was almost as wide as he was tall. His face wore a forbidding expression and Ally could see his lips moving as he talked.

Both of these people, however, paled beside the young woman smiling and waving in the back seat. As the vehicle passed to pull up in front of the museum steps, Ally caught a glimpse of a vision of flaming red hair surmounting a strong, yet delicate face, exotically painted, with a wide, generous mouth. In the few seconds it took for the car to drive past her and Chorus, Ally could have sworn that the princess’ eyes met hers with an almost audible click and Ally found herself waving, without ever remembering raising her arm.

Then the royal vehicle was past, pulling up to a stop several metres away and a number of important-looking people started moving towards the car.

Chorus turned to his partner with a low whistle on his lips. “Wow, did you see her? She is *hot!*”

“She’s gorgeous...” Alleandre murmured, before looking up at her friend. “I mean,” she said, flustered, “I’ve seen her in pictures before, but she looks better in person. That is—” She glanced back in the direction of the car, then back at Chorus. “Oh, shut up,” she muttered, looking anywhere but at him.

Chorus just smirked. “So, going ogling was a good idea, eh? Come on, you can say it.”

“Fine,” she grumbled, still avoiding his face. “Ogling was a good—” Alleandre broke off suddenly, her eyes fixed on the top of a building across the street.

The car pulled up in front of the museum. Evelynne said a little prayer of thanksgiving as the sirens of the police escorts were finally silenced and Sir Arthur exited, walking around the car to open the princess’ door. Looking up through the canopy at the brilliant blue sky, she made one last bid for freedom.

“José,” she addressed her driver, “how about just swinging this car around and heading out of the city? We can head for one of those lovely beaches just down the coast. Come on, what do you say? Sir ‘Protocol’ Arthur, here, refuses to let me go.”

“I’m sorry, Your Highness. I think he’d shoot me if I tried.”

“We’re surrounded by a quarter-inch of bullet-proof glass,” Evelynne said. “Besides, if you do I’ll give you his job.”

Incredulous eyes stared at her in the mirror. “I’m sorry, Your Highness, is that supposed to be an incentive?”

Evelynne was still smiling broadly as she was assisted from the car by Sir Arthur, but José could hear her cursing him under her breath as she got out.

“Traitorous coward,” she murmured. It was the mildest of her epithets.

Sir Arthur's eyebrows rose as he helped his ward out of the convertible. "Should I be worried, Your Highness?" he asked in a low voice.

Evelynne sighed. "No, I'm just adding another name to my List," she explained. She gave him a brief grin before slowly walking forward to meet the Mayor and other dignitaries who had assembled to greet the Atlantlan Heir.

Her bodyguard let her move a few paces ahead as he fell back into a less obtrusive position, his eyes never ceasing to sweep the crowd. He observed the other members of the Heir's Guard with approval as they likewise kept a vigilant watch for any trouble. His earbud gave the soft chime signifying a transmission from the control centre.

"Crown, this is Anthill. We have shut down the transmitter. Attempting to contact Eagle Three now." The following silence seemed to last forever as Sir Arthur's inexplicable unease grew stronger. The relief when his earbud chimed again was short-lived. "Crown, we cannot raise Eagle Three," came Major Nixon's calm voice. Only years of association let Sir Arthur detect the faint worry in it. "We are trying aga—"

And Sir Arthur *knew*. He didn't know how he knew, but he *knew*. Eagle Three was dead, and the danger directed at his charge was only moments away. The knowledge flashed through his brain in a split second and training took over as he bellowed into his open mike, "Zulu! Zulu! Zulu!"

He saw the members of his team, startled in spite of their vigilance for the briefest of moments, cursed the too-small body armour restricting his movements and slowing him, knew it was too late and saw something moving at incredible speed from the crowds on his left towards Princess Evelynne, just as the first shot rang out.

The surrounding crowd, the police watching them, the sunshine, Chorus: they all disappeared as Alleandre's entire concentration centred on the two small figures on top of the office building. With preternatural clarity she saw them looking down through telescopic sights at the dignitaries below. She reached out with her mind and, in an instant, heard their thoughts, knew their target below, and felt a finger begin to pull a trigger. Only one would fire, she knew, the other saving her fire for the unlikely event that the first assassin missed.

The mental connection snapped suddenly, as it always did, but Alleandre was already reacting. The rest of the world rushed back into her consciousness as she desperately focussed her mind on the distant weapon and channelled. It was at extreme range, but the force needed was small, simply requiring the rifle barrel to move a few inches; Ally knew it had worked when the "pop" of the gunshot echoed simultaneously with a louder "crack" as the bullet struck the stone of the building instead of its intended red-haired target.

There was no time for triumph, however, as Alleandre had already focussed again, this time on herself, channelling energy, propelling herself over the police barricade towards the young woman. Ally felt the strain, as she pushed herself harder than she ever had needed to before, but grimly persevered. She literally flew past a large, bulky man who was already turning towards the princess, his hand reaching into his jacket. *The bodyguard*, a part of Ally's mind recognised.

The princess was still ducking instinctively when Alleandre careened into her, sending her onto her back with a thump that knocked the breath out of her, just as a second bullet tore through the space where she had been a moment before. The bullet took a large chunk out of the stone step nearby. Then Princess Evelynne's startled blue eyes were looking up into Alleandre's grey ones, and the princess was caught by their intensity, aware of the press of the body above her.

Even as she acknowledged that the body beneath her seemed to be largely unhurt, Alleandre's mind was already focussing one more time, this time reaching for an ability that she had developed mere weeks before. She channelled desperately, weaving her energy into an aura around her body, less than an inch from her skin. She held strongly to the focus, feeling it snap into place with a strength she could feel in her chest, just as the third bullet arrived.

Alleandre felt the impact of the bullet between her shoulder blades, gratified when the aura held and stopped the projectile, leaving it lying against her shirt. Her satisfaction lasted a fraction of a second, however, as she felt yet another bullet pass through her aura. Though its force was considerably attenuated by her mental field, it still had more than enough energy to penetrate her skin and burning pain erupted through Alleandre's right shoulder. Through the haze of pain, Ally saw an answering expression of agony bloom on the face of the princess and realised that the bullet had passed right through her own body and into the one below her.

Fighting to remain conscious, Ally struggled to maintain her focus, and felt a last bullet enter her aura, in the instant before an explosion of agony in the middle of her back dragged her down into oblivion.