

Candles of Lyrae: The Tharsis Canals – Ares' Tempest - Chapter 2

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| Beneath Pavonis they fought for air and fire. Now, in the halls of generals and the shadow of Tharsis, a princess dares to command |

Amber lights burned like blowtorches. Klaxons roared, reverberating down the escape shaft. Motors grated, inching the white exit doors apart... too clean, too aristocratic for miners' hands.

Air-starved, Raf gasped. "Seal's gone- push through!"

A surge of wind - sterile, sharp- scattered the tunnel dust like forgotten prayers.

"Fresh air!" Branik barked, his laugh cracked by blood and grit as he staggered into the glow. Voltage hissed from the guards' rifles, arcs of borrowed thunder toppling miners in scorched heaps.

Raf shoved forward, shoulders squared against the silhouetted rank of Stratocracy soldiers, their armor polished like feigned nobility.

"Smells like elitists" he spat. "Cowards without shock rifles."

The Stratocracy guards skittered back two steps, rifles wavering between Branik and the miners who outnumbered them two to one.

"Hold firm." Epauettes glinting, Major General Pericles strode forward, raising a pin gun channeled with red diamonds, leveled at Raf's chest. Each brass button of his frock was etched with the Sons of Ares.

Raf sneered. "Why shoot? Why not stab me with one of those medals?"

Her eyes cut the haze like diamonds. Lady Thalia stepped between them, shoving the barrel aside so hard it gashed her Juliette sleeve. "You will not kill him. I command it."

"Self-serving, these miners." Holstering the weapon, Pericles fixed his eyes on Raf.

"D-dad." Shaking soil from his tunic, Jendrik scuffed forward.

"Come here." Starchy, the Major General opened one arm with ceremonial precision. "You don't belong with the dirt."

“Take me to the Grand Marshal- immediately.” Lady Thalia shoved Raf forward. “And this one.”

“Your father hates these serfs. You’ll see.” Pericles sneered, a laugh suppressed in his throat.

“Do as I command.” Thalia snapped. “And see these ones tended.”

The Major General bent low, whispering to his son without breaking his gaze from the princess.

“T-they should go back... to the mines.” Jendrick parroted, glancing back for approval.

“Dress their wounds and feed them- Major General.” Thalia lifted her chin, fixing on the General’s eyes. “That is my command.”

Holding her gaze, Pericles bowed fractionally. “As you choose, M’lady.”

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Like a carmine moonscape, the Tharsis plateau cradled Deimos. From the panorama, Grand Marshal Krrel affirmed his domain.

“Dare you enter L’chambre Rouge.” Krrel turned, stepping forward once before waiting on her approach.

“Father... he saved me. The rest refused...” Lady Thalia rushed forward, clasping his hands. “They refused to come- but Pericles and...”

He wrapped his arms around the princess with ceremony, not tenderness.

“Do you know- if you stepped through this glass, you would not die immediately?” Still clutching the princess as his prize, Krrel locked his gaze on Raf. “You would feel Mars in all its purity and power, just before you succumb.”

“I know the power of Mars.” Clenching his fist, Raf’s arm showed the thickness of a life of toil. “From underneath.”

“He’s wounded. Please father.” Lady Thalia pushed back, shaking Krrel by the waist. “Don’t send him back.”

“To keep the Major General at bay... I should listen to my daughter.” Her father quipped, laughter veiled. There was more truth to the statement than he cared to admit.

“He’ll go to the Shipyards.” Krrel flattened his expression and nodded.

“What about the others? Please father.”

“Perhaps one more artisan.” Krrel looked back over the plains of Tharsis where Pavonis smoldered. “The rest... there are necessary tasks below.”

“Thank you, Father.” The Grand Marshal stepped back, eluding her reaching arms.

“Make sure you stay away from the Noctis Shipyards, daughter.”

The Grand Marshal pointed at Raf. “You... you don’t ever leave your station.”

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Gantry cranes clustered over the Imperial ships of Mars, their hoist cables a garnet spiderweb strung with skins and weaponry, metal glinting like mica in the sand. Silent in the thin air, sunrise pulled no light into the fissures of Noctis Labyrinthus.

“You’re not supposed to be here.” Raf smiled. Her hazel eyes matched the canyon shadows.

“It’s an official visit.” Lady Thalia dismissed her handlers with a nod. “To visit the finest craftsmen on Mars.”

“I’ve learned piloting.” Raf pointed toward the nearest Imperial battleship. “I’d rather fly something faster.”

“They look fearsome.” She brushed his flexing arm. “Almost as fearsome as my rescuer.”

Raf pointed again. “Paper tigers. Armed, but hollow.”

“Your father needs a truce with Earth. They’re just tin cans. He’s pretending.”

“My father says Earth defies Mars.” Thalia’s tone made it a question, her fingers tightening on his arm.

Raf’s face turned grey. His voice dropped. “Nobody is going to obey Mars. I’ve heard rumours... ships... giant ones, big enough to swallow these whole.”

“Will they attack Mars?” Lady Thalia faced her rescuer. “I could spy on the council meetings?”

“I’m betting Mars’ll strike first.” Raf brushed a strand of dust from her hair. “I’ve been thinking...”

“What?” She gripped his shoulders, voice urgent. “Tell me. Please Raf.”

“I can’t tell you. Come back in two days. I’ll show you.”

Thalia’s hand slipped from his shoulder. In the canyon, gargantuan artillery strained the tower cranes of the Noctis shipyards, their weight hanging in the silence.

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The procession returned to the palace, its enfilade stretching in perfect symmetry, marble and steel lit by the high windows. Major General Pericles' heels clicked with each step, echoing stride for stride with the princess until they stopped, facing one another beneath the vaulted light.

"Your father was aware you visited the shipyards, m'lady?" His voice was all courtesy, though the sarcasm dripped like acid.

"What do you want, Pericles?" Her voice hissed back.

"A simple favour. To keep Mars strong." Stroking his ducktail, he eyed her for weakness.

"You mean military rule. Say it plainly." Thalia's fists clenched at her sides. "Supplanting my father."

"We both see Mars' future. Without the military-"

"A deceitful military." She stabbed her finger toward his medal bar. "Say it for what it is."

Silence permeated the hall. Behind her, the Palace Guard tapped their pikes, hammer on stone, readying defiantly.

Pericles raised his arms toward the red-lit windows. "We cannot be choosy if we are to defeat our enemies."

"The first being my father." Her words landed like a blade.

"Misguided, yes. An enemy? No." Flanking the Major General, his soldiers dropped to one knee and unholstered their pin guns.

"I demand again. Say what you want." She imagined driving a knife into the Major General's bulging jugular.

"Thank you for the conversation. M'lady." Pivoting, Pericles and his guard marched into the enfilade's shadows.

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Darker than before, the palace walls squeezed around her like a prison, Approaching L'chambre Rouge a small shadow wandered within the tall columns.

"Hello P-princess."

"The young Regent, just a little snake." Hoisting him by the tunic Lady Thalia lifted him to his toes. "Snakes belong in the fire of Pavonis."

"N-no... p-please princess."

"Run back to your father, before I feed you to the mountain."

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Versailles-like drapery framed Mars' horizon. It looked as if Krrel himself could step through the panorama onto the plains and summon alien armies beyond.

"Why do you defy me?"

"That's not important." Thalia's voice cracked. Tension wicked the moisture from her throat. Her father had laughed once, back when he was friend to her. Mentor. Father. When did that change?

"Pericles... he's planning to take over."

"I told you." Krrel pounded his fist on the glass hard enough to make the translucent alloy vibrate. "Stay away from him. He is beneath you."

"He aimed his guns at me." Thalia stepped closer, trying to draw his eyes to hers. Convincing him of the danger was critical. "He's capable of anything."

"We need to be prepared for Earth's attack." Opening his arms to the evening stars, the Grand Marshal stepped toward his daughter. Each step was precise. Unkind.

"You need help." Thalia met his steps and touched his arm. *Convince Raf, and the rest would follow. A brave, unpredictable force.* "Enlist the miners... I'm sure-

"Power comes from the core." Krrel brushed her hand away and stalked before the panorama, arms carving furious gestures against the glass. "Don't you see? With power, we survive."

"Please, Father. Pericles will take you." Thalia brushed his back gently. "The miners... they're courageous."

Swatting her hand away, Krrel pivoted to an axial image of Martian topography. "And you conspire with them."

Following two steps behind, Thalia forced back the salt rising in her throat. "Father, please, open your eyes to the real enemy."

Tunnels and shafts illuminated- hundreds, spidering outward like veins into the ferocity of Ares. "Below the mantle... that is power."

He was never going to help the miners. Thalia forced a dry whisper. "You sent them below."

“Earth will see real power. My power.” An electric overlay wove through the tunnels like rivulets of spring water, flowing to a hidden terminus. Something new. Something no one on Mars had ever seen. Whatever it was, anyone left in the tunnels would be dead.

“They saved me, and you sent them back.” Knots churned in her stomach, fury rising at what her father had done. The miners would have kept fighting, but instead he had driven them even deeper into Mars’s ferocity. “All of them?”

“Look at Tharsis. Mars will be the seat of power.” With the edge of his palm, Krrel carved the plateau into imagined weapon emplacements, ending with Ares’ tempest - Mars’s mortal weapon.

“Pericles threatened me. He threatens you, and you do nothing.”

“No one will dare oppose us.” The Grand Marshal’s eyes glassed over, already speculating on devastating wars to come.

“I need to get help... now.” Thalia’s mind whirled. How could she save her father, the miners, and Raf?

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Vortices stirred over the Tharsis bulge, and as if driven by Ares himself, a crimson column of dust rose before the panorama glass, then carved its path toward Olympus

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Author’s note:

This is Part 2 of a mini-series Candles of Lyrae: The Tharsis Canals. I’d love to hear your thoughts on writing style, characters and pace. I’ve outlined the upcoming chapters