

Hello,

We've never met, nor will we ever; and I find myself thinking that is both blessing, and curse.

Had we met before, you would know without a doubt that I will miss him greatly, and the pain of his loss will be felt by us all. Would that I could meet you, that these words would not be so much ink on parchment; and I could express in person the bravery of your son.

The cowardly part of me is glad, however, for I could not bear to see your anguish; I lack the strength to recount in person the heroic deeds your son accomplished, the lives he saved within our company. Your son was a soldier, a brave man I count myself lucky to have known, but he has given all a soldier can give.

It is with deepest regret, and heartfelt apologies, that I inform you Thelonious `Weaver` Vindram was slain in battle, on the third nineday of Pale Sun.

May Kell protect his travel through the planes, and the rest of the Pantheon ease your suffering,

Captain Eloise Stormrun
Commanding Officer, Alpha Company `King`s Own Flacons`, Bone Breaker Brigade

Eloise finished signing the death note and her eyes drifted to the stack of completed notes; she quickly glanced at the list of dead soldiers who still needed acknowledgment, and a sudden wellspring of fury rolled through her. She fought the urge to throw everything off her desk, settling for throwing her inkwell at the door.

The crystal inkwell was not designed to meet a stout wooden door at such velocity and the tiny shards that exploded into the air gave her the tiniest sense of satisfaction.

A polite knock rapped against her door and she was about to call out to the duty sergeant that everything was fine when the door promptly opened. Eloise suppressed a grunt of annoyance and quickly stood up.

The flared falcon wings, carved out of jade and set inside a small golden circle, flashed in the light of her office. Eloise wiped all emotion from her face as she saluted General Greyborn, the commanding officer of the whole damned task force.

"Your men performed admirably Captain; once more the King's Own Falcons have proved to be a pivotal company." The general's face glowed a ruddy red and it was obvious he'd been celebrating while his brigade commanders had been mopping up after the battle. "I'm told it was your orders that rallied the remnants of the Bone Breakers after that nasty skirmish that slew

poor Major Respirio. Saved our flank from the horde of slaving barbarians, the way I heard it.” Eloise’s muscles twitched and her lips moved as she fought the urge to spit on the floor.

“We did what we could, sir; some few of us were just lucky enough to survive.” Her eyes travelled to the stack of papers on her desk and it took all her strength to unclench the fist held at her side.

“I was told you’re a modest one; a woman who lets her actions speak rather than her words; a field commander, tried and true.” The general sat himself in front of Eloise’s desk and gestured for her to sit as well. “Well I’ll be blunt Captain, the King needs you, and he needs you in a rank where you can get some shit done. You’re an outstanding strategist and the only reason you’ve been a captain so long is your lack of patronage. As much as we like to think otherwise, the army is not actually a meritocracy.”

Eloise watched, frozen in place as Greyborn snapped his fingers, and the door to her office opened once more. The duty sergeant walked in and handed a small envelope to the general before returning to his post.

“Kettu needs a permanent task force Captain Stormrun. The barbarians are attacking more and more frequently, in greater and greater numbers. I have the power to brevet you as a full Colonel, and make the rank permanent once I get home. You’ll never get an opportunity like this again Eloise.”

The room was silent and the confident smile on General Greyborn’s reminded Eloise of an oily snake; he waited for her response, confident she had no choice in the matter.

THUMP!

Despite her size, Eloise had been a soldier for most of her adult life, and the force behind her fist striking the desk was enough to make the stack of death notes jump. She stared, bewildered at her shaking fist, and through clenched teeth she said,

“I’ll be damned six ways from tenday before I sign on for more of this.” Her eyes fell to the slight bulge in her abdomen and the hurricane of emotions that tore through her demanded another physical display.

THUMP!

“I cannot state how emphatically I decline your offer, General Greyborn.”

~*~*~

Thump

Eloise's eyes snapped open and her callused palms found the hilt of her sword in an instant. The slightest tang of salt hung in the air. The dim interior of the cabin afforded little in the way of observation. Still, something had woken her and she calmly laid still waiting for whatever it was.

Thump

She placed the sound and relaxed. She worked at a sore spot as she debated about what to do. She could fall asleep in seconds, a necessary trick to learn when you made your way soldiering; and now that she knew what the sound was, it wouldn't wake her again.

With a sigh she didn't really feel, Eloise rolled nimbly to her feet and went off in search of the...

Thump

A full moon hung low on an unseasonably warm Pale Sun evening as Eloise made her way up to the deck. She nodded a brief acknowledgment to the watch sergeant and strolled towards the stern of the ship. The slivers of silvered light glanced off the calm waters of the Sea of Ghosts, and Eloise stopped for a moment to remind herself of the beauty that Delphair...

Thump

"Sweet Kell's hairy pair LT, I'll toss you into the bloody ocean if you're going to keep throwing up. I can hear you pissin' and moanin' all the way in my bloody cabin! I don't need you denting a King's vessel because you still haven't learned to keep your blithering trap shut!" Eloise allowed herself a small smile as she resumed her evening walk. One of the few pleasures in being an officer was the ability to shout obscenities whenever, at whoever, you damned well pleased.

Completing her journey to the back of the ship, Eloise was treated to the wildly flailing legs of Lieutenant First Class Rohjan Kepesk, her second in command. Rohjan had been with her almost since enlistment, and she counted on his easygoing reliability to temper her bouts of frenetic energy. He was a fine tactician and she was lucky to have him in her unit; he was also a man constitutionally incapable of not throwing up after 15 minutes on water.

The queasy young man righted himself and snapped smartly to attention. The effect was marred slightly by a stain of bile on the fringe of his uniform but Eloise appreciated the effort and fired off a return salute.

"For a nation whose navy is the finest in the known world, we seem to have quite the dearth of able bodied men don't we Lieutenant?" She tried to keep a straight face but his motion sickness was an oft joked about illness and the edges of her mouth couldn't help but pull up.

“This ma’am? It must be something I ate, Weaver was on cooking duty tonight and you know how nervous first timers are when they ship out. He must have been too preoccupied to cook properly.” He flashed a lazy smile openly at his commanding officer and was rewarded with a dead panned wink.

Captain Eloise Stormrun was one of the most decorated soldiers in King Hazama’s military and her soldiers counted themselves as an elite unit. She was fearless in battle, a deadly strategist, and her sense of humor was pervasive. Rohjan could count on one hand how many officers lead their men with the precision and dedication of Eloise. He was proud to be a member of the King’s Own Falcons; with Eloise in charge, the company had earned another trio of decorations to add to their battle honors.

She was a skilled teacher too, and Rohjan had actually turned down command of his own company for this tour so that he could gain more knowledge from the woman. Not that he’d ever tell her that.

Eloise’s eyes glazed over a bit, as she thought about the trip so far. Weaver was new, and quite young to be assigned to her company, but he’d shown great promise. Still, perhaps his cooking skills were not up to par with the rest of his abilities; it would certainly help explain why she’d been throwing up so often.

“A bout of nerves eh? Well, that’s to be expected and accounted for I suppose. Which reminds me, we’ll need to give Weaver the Speech sometime tomorrow.”

Casting a quick glance towards the railing, Rohjan swallowed slowly and asked, “The Speech Captain? Weaver seems a stout enough lad; I doubt he’ll need the Speech.”

Eloise’s gaze shifted, and she looked off the port bow, to the slightly darker fingers on the water that signified land. She fooled herself into thinking she could see tiny pinpricks of torch light, twinkling like stars as the ship sailed on.

“Everyone needs the Speech, Rohjan. We’re not a damn warrior society. We don’t breed these boys for battle and fill their heads with claptrap about honor and ‘becoming a man’.” Eloise leaned against the railing, a sudden weight settling on her shoulders; steel and suffering waited on the horizon, and she glanced off to starboard. The King had sent an entire division to stave off the invaders, and a flotilla of ships bobbed along around her.

Over 10, 000 men and women, a little over a third of King Hazama’s standing military might, sailed for the largest landmass in the world. Eloise hated coming to the mainland; she was born for the islands and sea that made up most of the world. The plethora of ships drove forward, their captains sailing the treacherous waters of the Sea of Ghosts with ease, and Eloise looked on grimly to their destination.

Lying to the south of the continent, Kettu was a verdant field of farmland that did a booming business with the island nations that comprised the rest of Delphair; and to the north, the Haunted Wastes. A long stretch of parched sand and tiny scrub trees; the only people who lived there were constantly at war with one another. Barbarian clans constantly clashing in a continuous struggle for the few resources available. Every few generations however, one idiot with a big stick would manage to keep the daggers out of his back long enough to unite a few clans and they'd inevitably turn their eyes to the south.

As the ships slid silently through the sea, Eloise found herself wondering how many would wind up spiked on some barbarian's steel in the middle of piss all nowhere. How many friends and loved ones would read her words, and curse her name, when the war was won and all they had to show for it was a death note? How many people would disappear beyond the veil?

Eloise suddenly felt sick, and her hands gripped the side of the ship, knuckles popping with the force of her revulsion. So many people who might have lead normal lives, were it not for someone else's desires.

People who laughed and cried and ate. People who loved and hated and created. Eloise suddenly felt far older than her 34 years and she looked to the stars; searching the heavens she found herself questioning the Pantheon.

Why?! What have they done to deserve this death, so far from everything familiar?

She pulled her eyes back to the Sea of Ghosts, and slowly tried to shake the heavy, invisible blanket that had settled around her shoulders. "We're not cold blooded killers Rohjan. We all need the Speech, even you idiots who've heard it a few times." Eloise closed her eyes and felt the fear slide into her stomach. An old, unwelcome guest, she was at least used to his presence. Once upon a time, the icy tendrils that wormed their way through her veins might have frozen her, but now she knew the fear for the necessary sensation it was.

"The Speech reminds us that we're fighting to protect our homes, not take away someone else's; that Death is always waiting, but we can grin and bear it. This is one of those things you're just going to have to take my word for Rohjan; one of the many reasons I'm in charge."

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It's amazing, she thought, how the body can become accustomed to the absurd. Sure, the first time you see a man's throat slowly pulsing the last of his life into the dirt, it's going to stick with you. Survive enough battles however, and you'll find yourself slowly numbing to the putrid stench of stomach contents, the fear that flashes in a dying man's eyes as he pitifully wastes his last breath on a wail.

Weaver's eyes were closed, his throat had long since stopped bleeding, and he had died without a whimper, much less a wail. The daggered head of a war axe had snaked past his guard and the poor kid would never see what his sacrifice had bought.

Eloise had tried to run to his aide, the boy was no match for the big bastard wielding a monstrous axe. But a tiny girl, no more than 13, had blocked her path; stubbornly refusing to lower her weapon. With a swift kick to her legs, Eloise had knocked the girl prone, but it was too late for Weaver.

With a dancer's grace, Eloise had moved to block the barbarian's path and a cold, merciless flame burned in her eyes.

"Murdering your own kind isn't enough fun anymore huh? You've got to cut our children's lives short too?" Eloise counted herself one of the deadliest people with a sword in all of Delphair, but the hulking mass of muscle before her had simply rolled his shoulders, and she knew she'd have to rely on footwork and luck more than finesse.

"You think yours are the only people with children? What life we have, we were forced to take. The sand leaves nothing for us, and I would not have my daughter beg for a mouthful of water." The big man had settled into his stance and Eloise had nodded briefly; a fencer acknowledging a touch.

For the briefest instant, a man and a woman stood apart from the drums of war, the metallic scent of blood, and accepted the grim reality of what the Races of Man would do to one another.

It was a moment that could never last.

On some silent, imperceivable cue, the two moved, and steel met steel. He was a strong man, but Eloise was a professional soldier. She moved as liquid, sliding the heavier weapon aside when she could, and flowing around his slower strikes when she couldn't.

The way he'd carried himself had worried her, but he was actually a worse fighter than she'd thought. Most barbarians that wound up raiding the south were seasoned warriors, bred for contest. This bastard was big and strong, but after one pass, Eloise knew his life had not been leading him here. She was a deadly opponent, and he, just a man with a weapon.

Soon enough, she stood alone on the field of battle.

Winning has never felt so immaterial, she thought.

Eloise turned to find the girl she'd knocked prone kneeling in the dirt. Tears had carved twin trails through the grime covering her face. The pale skin beneath the dirt shone in the afternoon sunlight and Eloise threw up off to one side. The girl stared forlornly at the unmoving body at

Eloise's feet. Eventually, she got up and started to walk towards the line of barbarians in the distance. As she passed Eloise, the little girl offered a small, sad smile,

"It's OK; my daddy was a fighter."

Eloise turned back to her own battle lines. She and Weaver's corpse were a scant 100 yards away but as she looked to the familiar faces, blurred just beyond recognition, the distance seemed to grow larger. Eloise placed one shaking foot in front of the other, and with each step farther from the father she'd slain, the next came a little easier.

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The constant thrum of bowstrings spitting out shafts in a continuous, hissing, volley grated on her ears. Eloise looked out at the battlefield and the vicious slithering sound from the companies of archers crawled under her skin and irritated her in a way she'd never noticed before. The sibilant sound of skin sliding on silk, it was wrong.

Her eyes took in the field of dead, and soon to be dead, as she made her way back to her company. Barbarian bodies moved like a wave of flesh and her shaking hands slowly clasped the edge of the half-wall her unit had been assigned to. The little girl's smile haunted Eloise and she looked to her soldiers, her friends, to make some sense of what had happened that day.

"Stupid fucker, stupid fucker, stupid fucker..." Eloise's medic, Keemah Pyke, was screaming at a dead boy's corpse, busily trying to keep his heart beating.

"They just keep coming; the ignorant bastards are getting slaughtered like gods damned animals and they still just throw themselves at our formations." Rohjan was mumbling to himself while cleaning his blade. The sword shimmered spotlessly, as it had for the past half-hour; Eloise moved like a ghost among her men, but she took a brief moment to pat his shoulder, small comfort that it was.

The barbarian horde was the largest in recent memory. An expanse of pale skin and muscle spread across the horizon and Eloise found herself wondering how much time the women in the Waste must spend pregnant. It shouldn't have been funny, hell, she shouldn't even have been thinking about it; but Eloise felt the bubble of laughter roil up from her belly and she started shaking with barely controlled mirth.

Even after two and a half days of battle, Eloise and her fellow soldiers were outnumbered by at least four to one; and it would mean less than a stream of piss in a typhoon. The barbarians fought as warriors. They were solitary gusts of wind; raging against the immovable wall that was the better equipped, better trained, forces of the King's army.

Their lives would be spent in dribs and drabs, slowly growing the mound of bodies. Momentarily, Eloise saw the army for what it was, a demented machine perfectly designed to harvest its dark crop. She suddenly felt as if she was mired in deep snow; the slightest movement strained her muscles and her body was racked with chills.

Eloise tried to shake loose the sensation, raise herself above her men once more to rally them; it was her job to convince them they could give more than they had, to prepare them for the terrifying unknown that came with the ring of steel and the scent of Death.

Never before had that task seemed so impossible.

She looked at her men, her friends and comrades of years or days, and the instincts that had given rise to her career, her ability to say just the right thing at just the right time, eluded her.

A great moaning howl slowly rose above the constant thrum of bowstrings. Thousands of throats gave voice to a hymn of battle; one that slowly weaved into a haunting harmony with the falling shafts. The barbarian's war cries signaled that once more, Death prowled the field of battle. Ever hungry, Death came for King Hazama's army cloaked in a mass of muscle, and the fog in Eloise's mind disappeared almost instantly.

She saw the same clarity of focus slowly fight free of the mire in her soldier's eyes and they shook themselves, as if fighting off the effects of an insidious spell. Eloise quickly barked out orders, but the smile that forced its way onto her face died at her eyes.

In the calm places between life and death struggles, when the battle inevitably ceases for the briefest of moments, her men were lost and afraid. But in the chaos, when quick deed was needed just to stay alive, she knew she could count on them.

Her men were well trained, elite; they moved quickly and confidently and the strength of will she saw in her men made Eloise's heart break. Rohjan set about dressing their lines and the rapid shift from lethargic puppets, to men of purpose, rattled her.

Life in the army had taught them how to survive in the harshest conditions; as Eloise looked back at her medic, still screaming at the body of a foolish, brave, unlucky boy, she worried about how unprepared they were for the quiet of life to come.

The ground shook under the drum of thousands of feet and Eloise looked at the avalanche of shimmering steel and pale flesh.

She looked to her men and they, to her.

Eloise fought the urge to throw up again; and forced herself to cry out a challenge.

At least one more time.

The barbarians came, filled with wild ferocity and untamed aggression. They were met by cold steel and the grim determination of an unflinching military.

Eloise saw friends and colleagues fall; her own commander was blindsided while trying to position their reserves. Orders flowed from her lips without conscious thought and the fog of battle wove its way through the cacophonous roar of Death's symphony.

Bodies wheeled away from the twisted machine King Hazama had promised his allies and for each soldier that fell in the line of duty, scores of barbarians fell with him.

It was a battle of attrition and when Death had seemingly had his fill, when Eloise saw the will to fight leave her enemies, she breathed a sigh of relief.

-THUMP-

The meaty sound of impact shouldn't have been as audible as it was.

And yet, the whole world should have shook from the force of the blow.

-Thump-

The second impact was a whisper. Not the meaty sound of something striking flesh, but the quiet noise of Death's unstoppable footsteps.

Eloise turned sluggishly, knowing what would be waiting for her. She completed her turn, and felt the bottom drop out of her stomach. Her arms stretched out imploringly to the little barbarian girl's figure.

Arrows continued to rain down over the field of retreating warriors; with no heed to weapons that would care little who they hit, Eloise leapt into the sea of bodies.

Instantly she was at the little girl's side, all sense of distance traveled forgotten. The tiny barbarian dimly poked at the still vibrating shaft poking out of her abdomen, and Eloise moved to cradle her head.

A whimper began to wind its way through the battlefield and it took Eloise a moment to realize it was coming from her own throat. Gently, she removed the short sword from the shaking girl's hands, and clasped them in her own.

Eloise held the girl, and the girl smiled up at her.

-thump-

The flutter of the barbarian's heartbeat sounded briefly in Eloise's ears, but the girl was fading fast.

She was still smiling when Eloise felt the last, thready beat.

*~*thump*~*

Her eyes snapped open and Eloise's callused palms gripped the edge of her bed in white knuckled terror. The stale scent of sweat hung in the air and the dim interior of her bedroom afforded little in the way of observation. Still, something had woken her and she allowed the spikes of fear to freeze her, waiting for whatever it was.

-thump-

She placed the sound and a tremor ran through her body. She stretched beneath her sheets, her whole body sore, and debated about what to do. She could fight her way back to sleep, a necessary trick to learn when you come home from a war; but now that she knew what the sound was, she'd probably never get back to sleep again.

With a sigh that failed to encompass how she actually felt, Eloise rolled clumsily to her feet and went off in search of her daughter.

The heat of High Sun had burned through the day and the evening was only now starting to cool. Her beautiful daughter Tanya was crying quietly in her tiny bed, shafts of silver moonlight cutting her room into dark sections, broken up by patches of light.

The light of Eloise's life had been throwing her stuffed animals at the shadows that shifted around her room; and Eloise quickly lit a small oil lamp.

"Oh sweetling, you had a nightmare didn't you?" Eloise's tired face broke into a wide smile as she looked at her daughter, the greatest pleasure in her life. "Would you like mommy to tell you a story and cuddle for a while?"

The crying little girl ran a sleeve across her face and beamed up at her hero. The effect wasn't marred in any way, shape, or form by the trail of mucous she spread on her sleepwear and Eloise quietly wiped her daughter clean.

"Could you tell me a story about you momma? I want to hear about adventure and buckleswashing!"

Eloise Stormrun was a retired captain, from one of the most decorated units in King Hazama's military; and she was tired of reliving her life and death struggles every night, trapped in her own head. She was filled with fear, wound tight every day, and her only solace was her family and friends.

"Tales told round the campfire very rarely involve soldiers my love: plucky under dogs and heroic last stands, valiant young men and helpless young women, characters that we fall in love with and we're sad to see leave us when the story runs its course. These have little, if anything, to do with a soldier's lot in life."

Eloise picked up her daughter and wrapped herself around the young girl. After a great deal of fidgeting, her tiny bundle of joy was comfortable; and Eloise smiled down into the mane of soft blonde hair.

"We take on a burden so that our loved ones don't have to.

A burden borne not for king, country, duty or honor; but for those we love.

But we are not heroes.

We come home to heroes.

The people who stand by us; who help us pick up the broken pieces of a normal life, a life we leave behind, and struggle to come back to.

We all face that burden together."

Eloise squeezed her daughter tightly and just breathing in the scent of her was a sensation to fight for.

"Tonight's story will be filled with all the adventure and buckleswashing you could ask for my love. But it won't be about your mommy; this is going to be a story about your mommy's hero." Settling deeply into one another's arms, Eloise felt her shoulders relax, and the constant strain on her muscles disappeared, however briefly.

"Tonight I will tell you the story of a warrior princess; a young lady who fights demons and bad men; who protects old women and whose laughter chases away the darkness. Tonight I will tell you the epic tale of Tanya Stormrun, Fiercest Daughter and Staunchest Defender."