

A Half Blood's Tale

Book 1: Besieged

By

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Prologue

War's Foundation

In the beginning, there was void. Within that void, the first being awoke, and She named Herself Illia. To light Her path through the darkness, She hung the many stars of the sky, and a great lantern She called the Sun. Still alone, She crafted our world, Caldraut, and filled it with beauty and wonder, for this pleased Her. – Canon of the Lady, Chapter 1, Verse 1

Noctus.

The City of Chains commanded the Strait of Snakes, the sole passage to the eastern seas and the wealth of the spice islands of the south.

A quarter of a million souls lay within the bloated spider of Noctus. Built in the ebon shadow of Mount Noct, its namesake, the city's walls had been crafted of the basalt that made up the heart of the mountain. Fifty feet of black stone reached from east to west of the very tip of the Noctan peninsula, protecting homes, warehouses, and lives. The hollow mount still rose above it all, re forged into martial purpose. A Black Fortress ringed with artillery galleries and great gates that allowed access to its vast halls and storage.

Spindly fingers of docks projected into the Sea of Scales on the western side of the city, the east protected by the unscalable black cliffs from the crater wall left by the Sundering. A time when the Celestial City itself crashed into the world of Caldraut, and turned the ancient world into a graveyard. Crater became an ocean with the goddess Ilia's weeping, sorrow for her treasonous children nearly drowning what remained of the world.

An outpost of an empire across the sea, built to reap a profit in coin and flesh from its native inhabitants. The misery of sentient beings had been tempered into profit for centuries. The Strait Toll, devised in an act of spectacular cruelty, demanded that slaves be given up to the Empire of Ilium for passage. Elves, above all others, were valued. Long life, deep skill, and great beauty would allow passage of entire trade fleets beyond the straits. For the Empire, the crime of being non-human had only one punishment – bondage – and the lash was ever hungry for more.

Their patience exhausted, six nations banded together and marched upon the City of Chains. After centuries of minor brushfire wars and border skirmishes, over a hundred thousand soldiers descended upon the city. The Treaty Lands between Tor Ghontir and the Imperial outpost were put to the torch, and Noctus was invested.

Even with their vast numbers, the Coalition was faced with a nightmare scenario. A massive city, easy access to the sea, and possible reinforcements from the largest armada in the known world. So, they dug and they built. Every home, tree, and farm between the borderlands and the city was ripped up and out. Ditches and trenches snaked their way across the No Man's Land towards the black walls and the men and women that defended them.

Blackshield soldiers, citizen militias, and the gold eagle of the 19th Legion itself, the Anvil of Noctus. They waited as fleets tore each other to pieces on both sides of the strait, the city spared the worst of the naval battles due to the twin cannons of Gorgon and Minotaur, the alchemical monsters that

could end even the heaviest caravel or galleon that the elven Swan Fleet or the Ghontish navy could muster.

Each day, the trenches grew closer. Dwarves and gnomes spent their lives' blood to earn another inch toward the foundations. Imperial mages blasted holes in the trenchworks, and their allied knights sallied out from the city to massacre sappers. Every moment purchased by the defenders brought more reinforcements, more supplies from mighty Ilium across the sea.

This period's success for Noctus was attributed to one man, Severan Constantus, the First Knight of the order tasked with the defense of the city. It was his magnum opus. He dragged out the siege for years with deft maneuvering and careful marshaling of the city's available resources.

Bloody Saints, they were called, the Order of the Knights of Saint Sanguis had been the Imperial shock troops that never shied away from living up to their nickname. Pragmatism personified, they were no paladins or templars like those who served the Basilica. They served Empire, and the Senate demanded success. Ethics were not a consideration when the First Consul's name was scrawled across the orders given, and he had demanded that Noctus be held no matter the cost.

A war of attrition and inches, but eventually, the walls would be reached.

The Battle of the Great Breach would begin when several tons of alchemical agents erupted underneath the basalt walls of Noctus. Stones weighing more than a house were hurled through the air, landing without care or heed to what was under them. Innocent blood mixed with that of the Imperial defenders.

In a battle that would end more lives in a single night than several wars combined, the Imperial defenses held, but only just. Severan Constantus personally led the Imperial defense of the breach, slaying the Ghontish king in single combat. Success did not stick, and to the horror of the Imperials, Constantus was cut down in turn.

The heart had been cut out of both armies. With their king's body in tow, the Coalition withdrew to their siege line to bury their dead and mourn. Imperial magic barricaded the breach, but no follow-up assault came, even as the defenders anxiously waited for the hammer to fall.

Instead, sullen refusal to admit defeat endured. The Imperials would not evacuate the city, as was demanded, nor would the Coalition retreat back to their homes and their families. Days turned to weeks and then into years.

Some new general seeking glory or fame would rally another major attempt, but those always failed, and the complacency of the siege returned. A garrison wrapped a semicircle around the fortress city, just far enough back to be seen, but not bombarded from the walls. Complacency turned to routine and familiarity. Skirmishes picked their way at the edges of the front, Noctans trying to find their way out, or small groups trying to make it to the walls or into the sewers of the massive city.

For most, though, life went on. There was bread to bake, the daily catch that had to be hauled in, cobbles still needed to be swept, and children who had only known the reality of the siege for the whole of their lives needed to be raised. It had become normal. Routine. Day to day.

Twenty-five years the siege had endured. A generation without the Strait Toll being paid, children who had been born and then grown to adulthood without ever knowing peace, and nations teetering on the edge of financial ruin for pride.

For a quarter million souls, fate balanced on a knife's edge.

It would take a single half-blood to tip it.

Chapter 1

Twenty-Five Years of Siege

It is commanded by our blessed Lady that we must be brave in all things, whether speaking truth to each other or battling against all odds. For She demands courage and strength of all Her children. – Canon of the Lady,

Chapter 3, Verse 10

“Bloody Saints! To Arms! To Arms!”

Ser Aurelia Constantus cursed under her breath as she slammed the faceplate of her helm down into place. A relief of the goddess, the Lady Ilia, had been worked into the visor in lieu of the knight’s own visage. Impassive and stern, it gave her an inhuman appearance as her black-armored form charged into the pickets of the Coalition siege line.

The Imperial raid had struck into the outer edges of the trenchline that blocked Noctus off from the rest of the world. Decades old revetments held the trenches together, barely, and much of the old siege works had fallen into disrepair, frequent rains from the seas to each side of the Noctan peninsula doing more work than the Imperials ever had to degrade them. In

the narrow files of what remained, heavily armored wedges of shocktroops such as Imperial knights could do their cruelest work.

Ghontish men-at-arms, human traitors who had fled the Empire long ago, attempted to rally as the ebony armored phalanx of knights plowed into them. The attempt by the Coalition soldiers was scattered almost immediately. Three knights charged into them with their shields held high, throwing the front rank back into the second. The long hafts of their weapons, of great benefit on an open field, became too unwieldy in the trench as knights performed their butcher's work with maces and arming swords.

Aurelia cut through a halberdier with Defiance, the ensorcelled blade that had once belonged to her father, slicing through the wood haft and straight through the chest of the man beneath. Even as the man sucked his last few breaths, the Knight-Captain was already moving on to the next foe, the white cloak of her rank flowing behind her.

“Look for officers! Dispatches! I want captives!” cried the Knight-Captain, her voice an easy bellow across the hue and din of the battlefield.

The Coalition front and siege line arrayed against the city of Noctus was vast. It stretched for miles from one side of the Noctan Peninsula to the other to cover the entirety of the landward approach. Some parts of it still sported formidable defenses, but maintaining them required constant effort, thanks to Imperial efforts and the effects of time and erosion. That meant there were thin points, even gaps. Some enterprising fools made a relatively short existence running the blockade from time to time. It also meant there were soft points where forces sallying out of the city could apply pressure.

Or take what they wanted.

Sharp whistling interrupted the search, and well-fletched arrows embedded themselves into Aurelia's shield, right in the middle of the meat of the thumb of her family's crest. A raised fist, gauntlet covering it, and with the

Imperial emblem in the center to affirm the family's commitment to mighty Ilium across the sea.

"Archers! Shields up! *Percute!*" Advance as a wall, she had commanded in the old Imperial tongue, reserved for quick battlefield commands and holy texts most days.

As one, the twenty knights of the Third Cohort turned and presented shields to the archer fire as it tore through the scattered, collapsed trenchworks and palisades of the Coalition encampment. Bowmen bearing the sigil of Galandir, the elven nation-state, had claimed a rise and were raining death down upon her men.

Knightly shields caught arrow after arrow, but not all of the Imperial raid were knights. Blackshield militia fell beneath the enfilade as the knights advanced. Once close enough that Aurelia could see the sweat beading down the cheeks of the knife-eared bastards killing her allies, she called the charge.

She had barely even started giving the order when Vespasian and Tertius, her second-in-command, and ironically, her third within the cohort began their sprint. Vespasian hurled a clay globe towards the elven ranks, burning fuse already nearly gone, as he charged up a ramp and out of the desiccated trenchworks.

Aurelia knew what was within the ceramic sphere. Ilian fire, an alchemical agent whose formula was monopolized by the empire. One of the cruelest weapons a single man could wield. As it crashed into the midst of the Galand bowmen, it revealed that malice in a flesh-melting explosion of flame and power.

Half of the archers vanished in a pillar of fire that would not go out even in the heaviest rainfall. Ilian Fire had to burn itself out; lack of oxygen would not starve it. Since the beginning of the war, the Empire had made liberal use of it, as without it, the weight of numbers of the Coalition may have been too much to endure.

Shocked by the flames that had consumed most of their numbers, the remaining bowmen panicked and routed, sprinting away from the knights. Any not quick enough were cut down with sword and axe and mace.

“Got one!” Lucilla cried out, another of the knightly cohort. She held a knife-eared yeoman by the scruff of his tabard. Already, the man had taken a couple of heavy blows to the side of the head and was barely at the edge of consciousness. A sergeant’s stripes covered the shoulder of his Galand tabard. His ears were blunted, short. A half-blood. Human blood mixed with elven to create a hybrid that the Empire saw as chattel from birth.

There was only a moment’s appraisal by Aurelia, “Perfect. I want him in shackles and ready to move! We have what we came for! Withdraw! Leave the dead!” Her gaze circled the battlefield.

Orthio, assigned by the Holy Basilica as the cohort’s medic and healer, remained kneeling next to one of the city’s Blackshield soldiers. “Captain, just one more moment!”

“I said move! Cast your healing, and if he can rise, then he comes with us, but not another second!” Aurelia snarled in frustration under her visor, already running short of patience with the inexperienced cleric.

“Lady Ilia and Dutiful Nalandiel above us, grant me the power to heal your holy servants! I call on your strongest magics to...”

A keen edge of warning laced through the Knight-Captain’s voice, as she recognized the cant of one of his strongest prayers, one that took the longest to channel properly, “Orthio, you stupid shit, don’t you...”

“...heal all your servants that stand before me! May they rise healthy and whole!” Sweat poured down Orthio’s dark skin from his bald pate, hands held up in supplication as magic pulsed through the camp and all around the cleric. All but the most grievously wounded began to stir and try to stand. Orthio helped the Blackshield lying next to him to rise.

“See, Ser Captain? Lives that can serve the Empire further –” Orthio’s attempt to placate his commander was interrupted as the clarion sound of a Galand warhorn cut through the battlefield.

“Waste of time that has cost us!” hissed Aurelia as she turned towards the Coalition’s reinforcements. Irritation blossomed beneath her helm, ears burning with the sensation of the magic crawling up and over her.

Galand spearmen, each bearing the tabards of their elven nation, advanced in rank over the same rise that had once held the archers. At their head was an elf, armored head to toe in mithril plate. A tabard with a stag’s head, twin swords crossed behind it, covered their breastplate, and their shield bore the arms of the Order of the Lady’s Guard. A paladin of the god Nalandiel, the elite of the elven army. A full regiment of over a hundred elves had come to the aid of the pickets.

Aurelia scoffed beneath her helm, “Got any more of that Ilian Fire, Vespy?”

“Nay, mum, but we have our prisoner, and I have two good feet,” replied her second.

“Withdraw! Back to the horses and then to Noctus!” Aurelia demanded as the Imperial troops began the retreat. Lucilla dragged the unfortunate half-blood along with her, who had been the victim of their raid.

Aurelia was not sure whether it was because her ears were bothering her, or just how bad her Hilumani tongue, the language of the High Elves, was, but she could have sworn the elven paladin screamed something about her mother at her before she withdrew as well. An insult of some sort, the Knight-Captain assumed.

Ser Aurelia stamped her way through the streets of Noctus with three of her knights in tow. Black-enameled plate covered each of them from head to toe, chased with steel trimming, and still showed signs of the recent battle.

Dried blood, scrapes, and dings had been collected like trophies. The symbol of the order, a sword, point down, held by the hand of the goddess, the Lady Ilia, had been worked into the pauldrons of each of the knights.

While Ser Aurelia wore the cloak of white that the position of Knight-Captain afforded her, the rest of her men wore crimson, though the caking of battlefield detritus worked hard to dull all their colors. She kept her shield slung over her back within the city, her father's blade at her hip. As powerful as the sword was, there was little gilding to it. The Order demurred from fancy ornamentation; it was not considered seemly to them, which is one of many reasons they remained encased in ebony with simple trim, instead of the fancy designs found on the mithril armor of elven knights.

“Two of the Blackshields dead in the initial raid, another five in the rearguard action as we withdrew,” rumbled Ser Vespasian, an import from mighty Ilium some years ago. The accent he sported still sounded like the home country. “They’re getting faster at responding to calls for aid, so it could’ve been worse. Haven’t seen that many knife-eared bastards at once in a while.”

One of the knights spat on the dusty cobbles as they walked. Disdain was casual, and the Basilica’s priests made sure to reinforce it during the sermons on the Lady’s Day.

Aurelia grunted, one gauntleted hand tugging and rubbing at an ear. Ever since the magic Orthio had thrown during the raid, it had been irritating her. Old scars covered much of it, as they did its opposite on the other side of her head.

“We need to be better about collecting the ears...”

“Aye, mum, the bounty. Legate’s still paying it, I hear, and I wouldn’t mind an extra consul or two in my purse.” Vespasian let a toothy grin split his flat, broad features. It revealed a pair of teeth that were long since missing.

Aurelia gave a soft sniff, her handsome features contorting into the briefest of scowls as she considered before inquiring, “What about that one we brought in?”

“Aye. Half-blood from the Twins,” Vespasian kept his voice lower as they walked through the crowds that parted for them, staying several paces away from the heavy black bulk of the knights. “Don’t much envy how he’s being treated at the moment.”

The Twins were the twin kingdoms of Galandir and Tor Ghontir. Tor Ghontir had been birthed from the wilds of Galandir when gifted to the humans fleeing Imperial rule. This had created a new nation by the elven king Theonar the Second. That was far enough back that even the elven ruler was in the ground, but the two nations remained in lock step with each other, which had earned them the nickname.

An auburn brow of Ser Aurelia, docked by a scar through its center, tilted up at her second’s statement. “Did you hear any of what he said? I was too busy reprimanding Orthio.”

Vespasian smirked broadly at the invocation of the cleric’s name, “Boy’s an idiot, but he’s our idiot, so I’ll give him another lesson later. Aye, mum, I did. One o’ the Blackshields slapped the half-blood about a bit but got him to admit the rumors’re true.”

Aurelia paused mid-step, one booted foot hovering, then returned to the cobbles of Trade Street, the central thoroughfare that cut through Noctus. Turning to fully regard her second, she spelled it out for confirmation, “The stunties are gone? They’ve withdrawn from the Coalition?”

“Aye. We haven’t seen their banner for weeks. No attempts at new trenches or tunnels in near a year. If the stunties are gone, the gem-gobblers’ll be right after. Gnomes don’t so much as polish a diamond without the Dwarves giving their say-so.”

A dazzling smile was displayed on Aurelia's features. "Vespy, I could kiss you! But I won't, because your wife scares me more'n a stuntie whose purse just got cut."

The assembly of knights all chuckled at once, each taking their turn, giving Vespasian a gentle ribbing, all about how thoroughly he was subordinate to his wife, Theodora. He laughed along with each in turn, then added, "Yer right to fear, she scares me something fierce, too, mum."

"I've spent my whole life defending this city, Vespy. I don't even remember the years I had before the siege, what few there were. Now, my father's dream of a day without this stupid fucking war may finally happen. The Coalition fracturing, just... just going home!" Aurelia threw her hands up to the air, "Blessed Lady Ilia! Please! Grant these idiot rulers some of your wisdom!"

Each of the knights gave a quick genuflection at the invocation of the blessed goddess's name. Tertius spoke first after the quick observance. A Noctan native, his voice was thinner, reedier than Vespasian's, but his bulk was no less imposing. "Lady and Her Son willing, mum, you'll see the day, even if yer father inn't with us."

The knights nodded as one in recognition of their fallen hero. Lucilla, the other female knight, added, "Well, I always figured the stunties for the smartest of a poor lot. Glad to see they saw sense and bolted from this fool affair."

"I wouldn't say they're the smart ones, but they've got common sense at least. Self-interest is the key tenet to the stunties and their beliefs, for their father is Murdran the betrayer," Ser Aurelia stole a quote from the most recent sermon she had listened to at the Basilica. It earned her grunts of agreement as the group turned to walk deeper into the metropolis.

The quartet strode further through the city, its streets filled with every gamut of life. From prostitutes to shopkeeps to flocks of children and their minders, the city was alive and moving. At this level, this far in and away

from the walls, it would be forgiven for not knowing there was a war on outside. Shops and homes and manufactories squatted together amidst the haphazard planning that had plagued Noctus through its whole existence.

A hard clang of metal came from the knee of Aurelia's armor, and she could feel the faint reverberation travel up her leg from the impact. Looking down revealed the assailant, a young boy, five to six years of age, who had a wooden sword that he had tapped the edge of her armor's knee guard with. This brought pause to the procession of knights, leaving Aurelia to remark with a faint smile on her red lips, "Why, ho there, I have been waylaid."

"Rar!" the little man gave his best war shout, "I'll be a mighty fighter for the Lady!"

The three knights behind Aurelia chuckled softly as she scooped up the young boy, holding him gently on an armored hip, "Why, I think you shall, young ser. What will you do with that mighty weapon?"

"I'll kill me some knife ears! Stunties, too!"

"Good form," rumbled Ser Vespasian, his praise joined by his two siblings in arms. "Well said, lad."

Aurelia's gaze darted amongst the crowd, looking for whichever woman would be the most panicked. Soon enough, a doughty woman in a baker's apron plowed her way through the day's traffic to reach the squadron of knights. Her face was beet red in embarrassment and from the heat of the oven. "Oh, pardon me, sers. I am so sorry, he got away from me while I was pulling the bread out... He don't mean nothing by it. He's just a lad..."

It was the smallest of points on the edges of the baker's ears that drew Aurelia's attention. Elven blood ran thin through the woman's veins, not even a half-blood. It meant she was human, or close enough for the law's sake. The Knight-Captain glanced at the boy, and she had not noticed the thin skein of elvendom at first glance. Small bumps hinted at where the points should be, and there was a slight cast to his eyes on further inspection.

Instead of commenting on it, Aurelia planted a warm kiss on the boy's forehead before handing him off gently to his mother. "Brave lad that came right up to us to show us his might. The Lady favors such boys. Feed him well and right, he'll grow up strong and courageous." Once her hands were free, Aurelia produced a single gold consul, the most valuable coins of the Empire, and held it up, "Bring me as much bread as this buys."

The woman's eyes went wide and round as she stared at more money than a month's wages for most in the city. In short order, she returned with two big bushels full, a younger woman who could only be an older daughter helping her mother cart a load that was nearly two full days ' worth of baking. "If'n you need more, Ser..."

"That's fine, dame baker." She flicked the promised coin to the woman, who bowed and curtsied repeatedly in appreciation. As the baker retreated, Aurelia ordered her men to take the bread, "Give it to everyone in the barracks. No more of that week-old stale trash for my men."

"The men still living in the barracks'll be appreciative, mum," Vespasian grabbed one of the baskets. "You'll not be joining us?"

"No, I have something to attend to at the manor. Too many nights out in raids and scouting lately, too few at home appreciating what we are fighting for. Give the men my regards. I'll be there early tomorrow for practice and drills."

Vespasian gave the best salute he could with a basket of bread under one arm. Lucilla already had the heel torn off one loaf and was chattering away with Tertius through a full mouth as the trio walked away.

Aurelia worked hard to push the smile off her features, to restore her mask as the stern Knight-Captain, even as she rubbed at an ear. They had been bothering her since the skirmish earlier, thanks to Orthio's recklessness.

"They're healing again," she muttered to herself as she made her way to the home her father had left her long ago. One hand tugged at the bun of her auburn hair. She followed the style all the women knights of the Order

did, with her hair kept in a braid, then rolled up at the nape of her neck. It mimicked the most popular hairstyle of the Lady Ilia's statuary, as did the shape of her breastplate and even the make of Defiance's blade.

By the time she had made it home, both bun and braid were undone. Her russet tresses hung loose about her head and down her back. A present from her father, her eyes and hair matched his colors in all Aurelia's memories and his portraits, as did her broad shoulders and taller frame for a woman. It had always been joked that Severan had giant's blood in him, and it ran true for his daughter.

Quiet and dimly lit due to how few souls now filled its once great halls, the Constantus manor house sat in the back of the Trade district, an area oft referred to as the Nobles' quarter. It was a stone's throw from the feet of the Black Fortress itself, as was only appropriate for a house as storied as the one Aurelia was scion to. No fanfare greeted her, nor smiling servants, no half-blooded bondsmen or elven body slaves were at the door as Aurelia shouldered through the front entrance.

She sighed as she glanced around and noticed that the few lit candles were half gone, some even guttering out near their bases. A hard kick behind her sent the door crashing back into its place, the latch falling back shut with a squeaking protest, as if well practiced from the habit. A few paces took her across the cluttered entryway, lousy with the detritus of a career defending Noctus against the interminable siege.

At a pillar that guarded the path into the broader living room stood a well-worn armor rack. The scrapes from when it had been moved from the armory to where it resided were still visible on the hardwood floors. Once used to gatherings and dances, it was all that could be done just to keep them swept clean. Aurelia quickly got her hands free of glove and gauntlet, depositing those on the lower shelf of the rack.

“Daph! Andy!” the Knight-Captain called loudly, using her voice best reserved for shouting across a battle. The next part, she grumbled lowly, “Where in the Lady's Breath did you bugger off to?”

Taking the opportunity, with her hands free and sensation returned to them, Aurelia rubbed at her worried ears once more. Fresh skin and healing twisted across the helix of each of them, and she swore again under her breath as she found a pustule of infection that burst between two calloused fingertips.

A sharp hiss came from between Aurelia's lips before she called out again for Daph and Andy, scowling deeper when no response came. She considered, briefly, trying to work her way free of her armor alone. It was not impossible, just infuriating. A buckle was tugged at idly before indecisiveness gave way, and the knight clomped her way through the house.

Most of the furniture was covered in sheets, portraits long retired behind their curtains. Only one remained visible in the foyer, allowing Severan to watch his daughter as she passed by it. Handsome, noble, clad within his black steel plate and the gold cloak of the First Knight. His auburn hair matched his daughter's, and an easy smile lit his handsome features, captured by the artist so well it had long replaced how he looked in his daughter's memories. Fingertips trailed lightly over the imported teak wood that made up the frame, a small section of stain worn away in the corner from the frequency.

A last connection to a better time and a beloved parent. Aurelia did not even think about the gesture as she made it, only noticing the after impression left behind in her fingers as she stepped past. Faint hesitation slowed her step, but she curled a fist, and forced herself forward through the empty halls.

“Daph! Andy! Where in Calumnia’s rotten gash are you both?”

Another corner turned, then Aurelia was in the old servant’s wing. Once home to multiple bondsmen and women and the occasional enslaved pure-blooded elf, only a single couple still called it home. Without even bothering to knock, Aurelia shoved open the door to the shared bedroom of Daphne and Andolius.

Both were halfway through dressing when she opened the door. With the appearance of a pair of startled deer, the two half-elves gave a pair of wide-eyed stares to Aurelia as she stood in the doorway. Crossing both arms over her chest, the knight leaned against the doorframe casually.

“So...” Aurelia started with a smirk.

“Mum! I, um, so sorry, we thought you’d be... um...” Andy tried to manufacture some form of excuse. His black hair hung lank around his head, untied from the usual tail he kept it in. His tunic was on, but he was struggling to find the bondsman’s belt typically used to cinch his waist.

“My fault, mum,” giggled Daphne. Shorter than her husband, her curly blonde hair was cut short in a halo about her head. Bright blue eyes regarded Aurelia shamelessly, “I was excited and dragged him along. You know how weak to my charms he is. The priest on Lady’s Day said I’d be fertile, and you know we’ve been trying...”

Aurelia rolled her eyes at the pair of them, “You two are positively the worst bondsmen a knight could have.”

Daphne beamed as she cinched the belt on her own tunic, a blue affair that went down to her knees. She skipped forward as her husband continued to search for his own belt and tiptoed up to plant a kiss on Aurelia’s cheek, “But we’re still your favorites.”

A warm smile was permitted to show on the knight’s features a moment before she tucked a pair of curls behind the tip of one of Daphne’s pointed ears with a fingertip. “Maybe. Let’s just say of all the bondsmen in my service, you two are, indeed, my favorites.”

Having finally located and secured his belt, Andolius cleared his throat, “Begging your pardon, mum, we’re your *only* bondsmen.”

“And yet, there still needed to be a competition,” Aurelia quipped before turning, calling back over her white-cloaked shoulder, “I want out of this damnable metal coffin for a few hours at least before morning. Let’s get that done, shall we?”

“Yes, mum!” both of the half-elves called at once as they followed Aurelia back to the entry hall.

Considerably less encased in armor and with a knee-length night shirt on over her small clothes, Aurelia decided it was time to bring up the irritation that had been following her since her cohort came in through the sally port near the Foundry Street gate.

“Orthio was using his healing magics again...” Aurelia started, looking into the floor-length mirror kept near the armor rack as she did.

“Lady’s Breath! That boy’s an idiot!” Andolius called, already pushing Aurelia’s hair back to peer forward at an ear.

“I know, I know, but he’ll also take an arrow to do his duty. He means well, but...” Aurelia let one hand rub at the ear not being examined.

“Definitely cartilage growth. Damn it to the Hells, I’m gonna have to trim them again sooner than I thought. It’s how fast elven blood makes you heal...”

The deadpan expression Aurelia gave Andolius through the image reflected by the mirror told him that Aurelia’s opinion of the trimming work had not changed since the last time it needed to be done. “I had no choice in having that ... that... blood forced into my veins.”

Andy scowled back at the image, “Skipping past another word there? Was it filth this time? Disease, maybe? Or was it corruption? That’s a favorite one of the Bishop’s.”

A sharp flinch came from Aurelia with the last one, and the indignation that was carried in the tone. She tried to apologize, stammering the words at first, then starting over, “Andy, you know I don’t mean that about you and Daph...”

“Every time you repeat it,” Daphne’s voice was soft, “you give power to that brainrot. Relly, dearest, when you’re with us, you need to be honest with yourself.”

Andy stepped back for a moment from Aurelia. Fetching his healer’s roll, he opened it flat on an old end table near the rack and mirror as Daphne spoke. Sutures were laid out before a scalpel was retrieved, “The reason I have to carve flesh off you on a regular basis is because you’re one of us. The diseased, the corrupted.”

“I know...” whispered Aurelia, her eyes darting anywhere that kept her from meeting the gaze of either of her bondsmen.

“You’re a half-blood, Relly,” Daphne clung to her mistress’s hand, holding tight. “Like us! No matter what the Basilica says, there’s nothing wrong with being what we are. We just are. Even if your mother wasn’t the Lady Julia, your pa was still... well... still HIM. That counts for something, right?”

Emerald eyes stared across the foyer from where the trio stood, Aurelia’s gaze drawn to her father’s portrait. Her features had taken strongly after his, barely registering her half-elven heritage aside from the ears that Andolius was getting ready to dock once more. Handsome and stern, like her father, with a strong jaw and broad shoulders. Only the ears and the mole on her chin had been her mother’s gifts. Long dead eyes bore through her and forced the knight to turn back to Daphne’s pleading look.

“This is going to hurt again,” was the half-blooded knight’s conclusion as she grasped hold of Daphne’s wrists.

“Aye,” confirmed Andy as he used a wedge of graphite to sketch along the skin where he would cut the misshapen lumps attempting to regrow at the edge of Aurelia’s ear.

“We’re right here for you, love,” Daphne kept tight hold of her mistress’s wrists. Freckled cheeks scrunched up as she smiled, “Don’t look away from me, keep your teeth tight so you don’t bite your tongue, and stay very still.”

Flesh parted beneath the surgeon’s blade.

“Severan Constantus Noctanus! Do not ignore me!”

Tiny and blonde, Julia Constantus stamped hard on the floor of Severan’s study. Her minuscule frame trembled with the rage that was apparent in her voice. One finger was pointed at the appointed Proconsul of Noctus as if he had no authority over her at all.

Relly peered around one of the edges of one of the many bookshelves within her father’s study at her stepmother, his actual wife, and the cause of so much of his misery. Julia had stormed in after Severan, who looked to have been in full retreat from the tiny woman. Not expecting either of them, the half-blood adolescent had ducked behind the furniture with what she was reading. A scroll filled with stories of fabled Iolias and his journey home to his island nation after being lost at sea during the great Sundering.

She had been halfway through reading the part of the story where his men were turned into pigs by the she-witch of one of the islands. It was through diplomacy and wit Iolias was freeing them and still finding a way to appease the she-witch so that she would point the way home for the crew. Relly loved every moment of it, but Julia’s appearance ruined her fun, as the woman always did.

“What else is there to say, wife?” Severan ran a hand through his auburn hair, thinning of late as the stress of the war dragged on. A sigh followed as he dropped into the seat for his writing desk.

“Wife? That’s how you address me?” Pretty, delicate features turned ugly as Julia scrunched her face into a frequent sneer. “There is a level of respect I am owed...”

Relly watched as her father rolled his eyes, then paused. His gaze landed on her for a moment, and he gave the quickest of winks, acknowledging her. Two small hands were clasped over the young girl’s mouth as she fought back a giggle at the sudden wink.

“Tell you what, dearest Julia,” Severan did not bother to stand, instead tugging on his doublet and leaning against the edge of his desk, “I will be a kinder, warmer husband to you the moment you can prove to me you haven’t touched the poppy weed milk that you’ve been sipping on every day for... oh... a month.”

“I need that for my pain and migraines!” Julia protested, her hands thrown up in the air, then stamped once more upon the ground. Perfectly coifed hair and delicately arranged silks turned her into an explosion of color with every erratic movement.

“Oh, please...”

Ignoring her husband, Julia powered on, “Migraines that your infidelity and the result of that betrayal have brought to our doorstep! Take your daughter to the bondsman and declare her!”

“I will not allow my daughter to be put up for auction!” snarled Severan, suddenly on his feet, massive frame dwarfing that of his wife.

To her credit, the small blonde did not shrink away or back down. She stood firm against her towering husband, “It’s a game every noble plays with their bastards, Severan! Accept it! Buy her back from whoever takes the bond if you don’t get it! All anyone’ll do is make her do chores as a joke! That’s what is always done!”

“My daughter will not be a slave! NOT FOR A SINGLE MOMENT OF HER LIFE!” bellowed the First Knight. Even Relly quailed back from the clear rage in her father’s voice.

Julia glowered at her husband, both hands balled into fists, “Fine, you self-righteous fool of a man. Just because you had to fill some knife-eared gash’s belly doesn’t mean that I should suffer the dishonor of you being caught. I’ll take her myself if you won’t.”

“You will not,” Severan advanced a single step towards Julia, and she retreated three in return. A low note of warning swam in the deep voice of the general. “If you try, our marriage will be as dead as the child that grew

in that diseased sack you call a womb, and when I divorce you, you will find how tiny that dowry was your father gave me. You will be alone, childless, and have no money for poppy weed. Are we clear?"

A soft huff came from Julia. Turning, she stalked out the opposite end of the room she had entered from. Her path took her right past Relly, who had worked hard to squeeze into the corner between the bookshelf and the wall.

Julia paused, spotting the half-blood. "You little shit..." Quicker than the adolescent girl could dodge, her stepmother grabbed the tip of one pointed ear and twisted it as hard as she could. "... fuck you and fuck that whore mother of yours."

A screech of pain and terror was Julia's answer from her step-daughter.

"JULIA!" roared Severan, crossing the room in only a handful of strides as he spotted the offense.

A cackle followed Julia as she scuttled away, retreating down a hallway as Severan, instead of pursuit, paused for Relly. Her ear cradled in both hands, the half-elf sobbed from the pain that throbbed through her. She curled up into a ball, the adventures of Iolias and the She-Witch forgotten on the floor.

Scooping her up, Severan murmured soft condolences to his daughter. He squeezed her tightly to his broad chest, both strong arms being used to support her. "We'll go see old Calthus. He knows that cantrip to make some ice... so there's no swelling."

Already, the ear was starting to bruise and puff out. Relly sniffed through her tears. "I hate her. I wish I had a real mother."

"I know, my sweetest ruby, I know. As soon as this war is over, we'll bring her back to you." Wide, oft-scarred fingertips brushed tears away from his daughter's cheeks.

“I wish I wasn’t … wasn’t...” She tugged at the uninjured ear tip in frustration.

“Shush. None of that. You’re perfect, my beautiful ruby, just as you are. You are my daughter, strong and brave, just as the Lady demands. Right?”

Another soft sniff, “Yes, Papa.”

“And your father loves you more than anything. As much as Lady Ilia loves you, just like in the Canon.”

Relly nodded at her father’s reference and all the verses in the holy book that they would read together when he taught her how to read. “Yes, I remember.” She sniffed yet again, then hugged tight around her father’s shoulders, “I love you, Papa.”

“I love you beyond words.”

Aurelia stared at the ceiling in her bedroom, both ears still sore from the suture work, and unable to sleep from it. Even as exhausted as she had been by the rest of the evening, slumber failed to call her home, even entombed within the warm limbs and soft skin of her lovers. Sighing, a thought nagged at her, and she worked to extricate herself from the gentle embraces with which she had been entwined. Daphne made a soft, incoherent noise and nuzzled forward into her husband to replace Aurelia within his arms.

Once free, she rose from the bed and proceeded to search among the many garments on the floor for her night shirt and small clothes. She kicked Andolius and Daphne’s tunics into a pile for them to find later, then dressed herself. Not bothering with a light source, she could see well enough in the dark thanks to the blood in her veins and was too tired to bother with the pantomime of not being half-blooded.

Her reflection drew her attention. Once her father's room, it had a mirror capable of displaying himself and Julia side by side. A normal human would barely see a silhouette, but the gloom in the room was clear enough for a half-blood. Fingers explored the neat stitchwork Andolius had applied to the edges of her ears' helixes. Perfect as always, the apothecary's apprenticeship she had sponsored for him had paid for itself over and over, the wire cages tucked neatly into them until they would hold a rounded shape on their own, something her blood ensured would only take a handful of days at the worst.

A ghost of a smile slipped across Aurelia's features as she collected her robe and tugged it tightly around herself before she snuck from the room and back out into the house. She padded down to the kitchen and collected a clean plate. An apple, some bread, a few slices of roast beef, and even a small brick of chocolate from Ilium's southern provinces were piled onto the plate. A feast for most of the citizens of the city, with the rationing that persisted due to reliance on the sea for everything.

A mostly empty bottle of wine was grabbed as well, a large pocket in the robe serving as its vessel as Aurelia floated through the house's lower floor. History and memories hid behind sheets and dust shrouds. So little of the house remained in active use with the singular inhabitant and her two remaining servants that it could be mistaken for abandoned at first glance.

A pair of bedrooms, the kitchen, and a small area of the foyer were what most visitors could ever see as still occupied. Aurelia headed towards the room that only three people knew also contained another soul.

The old kennel.

The half-blood pushed her way into the kennel with her ass first, fishing the bottle of wine out of her pocket with one hand, food held in the other. Barely any light filled the room, the lantern within running low on oil. Already, she could hear the complaining earned by so late a meal.

“Lady’s Breath, it’s about fucking time! I’m star...” a softer voice, nasally and lilting due to its accent, full of annoyance and indignation began the complaint, only to trail off as Aurelia turned to face the voice’s owner.

Held within the largest of the cages formerly reserved for the hunting dogs of the Constantus clan was a woman. Slender and elegant, the knife-shaped ears that stood straight back from her head immediately revealed her ancestry as an elf of the nation of Galandir, the leading power of the continent and the current commanders of the Coalition of Nations. A simple blouse with a brown peasant’s dress over it was all a great beauty as the prisoner within the cage was allowed, her feet barefoot on the rush-strewn stones of the kennel floors. Her hair was midnight and wild, eyes bright and blue, with the angular cast to her features that all her race were known for. On her chin was a familiar dark beauty spot.

Chains clattered as she moved up to the bars of the cage, gripping one in each hand. Her wrists were held together by manacles and a short length of chain. Divine runes circled each of the manacles, held in place not by a lock, but by the command of their owner.

“What are you doing here?” the prisoner demanded, features twisted into a scowl.

“Food,” explained Aurelia simply as she set the plate in front of the slot that had been cut for feeding. A light nudge with a toe sent the meal in towards the elf before holding up the wine bottle. “Hold out your cup, I have a treat for tonight.”

Doing as she was bid, the elf sniffed a pair of times, “Lady’s Breath, you stink of sex.”

Aurelia shrugged, filling the cup with the last of the wine, “Now you know why you were forgotten about. Would you prefer to go without?”

A dark glower was the answer at first before a sullen, “No.” Once full, the simple wooden cup was withdrawn, then sniffed at as well. “Smells like shit wine. One last meal and some poison to finally be rid of me?”

That earned a snort from Aurelia, “All wine in Noctus is shit. Think Illicum’s senators are sending us the good stuff on the supply ships? And no, I can decide to be nice from time to time.”

“Nice would be letting me out of this fucking cage, Aurelia.”

“Let’s talk about things that might actually happen,” Aurelia turned, stepping towards the door to deposit the bottle into an old, empty bucket, then go about refilling the lantern so the light in the room would cease guttering.

“Well, how about you hurry up and die in the war so that your pets will finally take pity and let me out.” The prisoner snarled out before deciding to take a sip of the wine. “Yeah, it’s shit.”

“Ahh, yes, Illicum’s gift to the world with their eloquence and grace, the elven race is. Plus, you really don’t want that.”

“Oh, and why’s that?” the elf bit out as she dragged over the tiny stool that she had been allowed in her cage and settled next to the food to start tearing off hunks of bread with her teeth.

“They don’t know the command word for your manacles, Adelaide. You’d have to saw your hands off to get rid of them.” Aurelia paced back over to the cage, but stayed at arm’s length away from it, a length she had become very aware of from prior experience.

Adelaide did not bother trying for her, just eyed Aurelia for a moment before taking a large bite out of the apple and then giving it a good inspection with one eye.

“No worms, I take it?” the knight kept her tone casual.

Adelaide chewed a handful of times, then swallowed, “No, it’s… just an apple. Okay, so you brought me my food and some of the shittiest wine I’ve ever tasted. Did you actually want something? I’m not going to suddenly make up and moon over you because you weren’t actively fucking awful to me for five minutes, you self-hating fool.”

A sigh came from the half-blood, “I didn’t expect you would. I just... I dunno...” She swore under her breath, “I don’t know what I expected, I’m sorry.”

“Fuck your sorries!” Adelaide slapped the bars of her cage hard enough they rattled along with her chains. “You want decency and a kind word? An inner thing screaming out in you for mommy? You shouldn’t have kept me in here for the last year, Aurelia Constantus!”

“You snuck back into my city out of the blue!” Aurelia matched her prisoner’s ratcheting volume, “Did you think you could just abscond with me back to Galandir or some other pathetic fairy tale?! Do you think I had any memories of you other than knowing I was missing something, you knife-eared gash?!”

Adelaide shot to her feet at the crude insult, hurling the cup through the bars at Aurelia. It was batted away by an arm and sent spinning across the floor, leaving damp sprays of wine behind it. “Fuck you! You think I can’t recognize a pair of docked ears? I’m not the one who mutilates myself on a regular basis, Aurelia! I’m not the one who fucking parrots that bitch Julia to her own goddess-forsaken mother!”

“This... this was a mistake...” Aurelia turned to pace towards the door.

“Giving birth to a bigoted piece of shit like you was the mistake!” her mother called after her, banging on the bars of her cage over and over again. “Champion of the Lady of Courage and Strength, my left ass cheek!”

As Aurelia shut the door behind her, she could still hear her mother’s final taunt, “You’re a coward, Aurelia Constantus! Your father would be ashamed of every part of you!”

With those words, Aurelia fled, heaving sobs with each step.

Chapter 2

Wavering Resolve

We must be the shield of the lesser. There is no more courageous thing than to use your strength to defend the innocent. – Canon of the Son, Chapter 5, Verse 3

“Six dead elves! A dozen Ghontish men slain! Sergeant Albrecht missing! Probably taken! Many more wounded! Only seven of their own left behind!”

Malindria Caulithil paced back and forth within her tent as she ranted. Iconography of Lady Ilia and Her Son, Nalandiel, hung from tentpoles. Her mithril armor stood upon its rack, the tabard with its stag’s head and crossed swords draped once more over the breastplate as it waited to be called upon again. Already, it had been stripped, polished, and its near-perfect sheen restored from even a simple traversal of the outer defenses.

She kept her midnight hair tightly wound in a braid, as was the style of the women of the martial orders. Let loose from the bun at her neck within her tent, it trailed behind her between her shoulder blades. Tall and elegant, like all of her kind, her bright blue eyes were fierce as she spoke passionately. Even twisted with frustration, her features were as beautiful

as any of her kind, with a dark beauty mark on her chin the only hint at imperfection.

“Peace, daughter. I have seen far worse examples of a first command.” Rotheran Caulithil stepped forward and cupped the elven paladin’s cheeks with both of his bare hands. He wore his own mithril plate, also bearing the marks of the Order of the Lady’s Guard, but gauntlets and helm both hung from his belt. “You drove them back, prevented any further loss of life, and reaped the greatest number of our foe in turn.”

Malindria squeezed her eyes shut, both trembling hands balled into fists at her sides. “It’s not about killing, Papa! I don’t want to kill anyone! It is about getting inside and finding mother! That’s the only reason I agreed to join this goddess-forsaken farce!”

With slow, familiar movements, Rotheran leaned forward and planted a gentle kiss on his daughter’s forehead. He waited for her to open her eyes before smiling, “We will, I swear to you. Trust in the High King’s plan, and your faith will be rewarded.”

“It’s so hard right now, Papa,” huffed the younger elf. She crossed her arms over her chest and sulked. “With the dwarves and gnomes both withdrawn, we’re reduced to just watching the walls. Desertions have tripled over the last few months. Everyone wants to go home! The kingdom is nearly bankrupt! Should the debtors come calling, the council will unseat Theonar in favor of the prince!”

“Nalandiel rewards fidelity to cause and oath, as proscribed in the Canon of the Son. Keep true to the cause, even if others do not. Where would we be now if Nalandiel had joined his siblings in rebellion against our Blessed Lady?”

Malindria let a smile slip onto her features as her father tucked a lock of midnight hair behind a pointed ear. She allowed herself some crude language, slipping into the Ghontish tongue to say it as she meant to, as

the Hilumani speech was too formal to say it so bluntly, “Properly fucked, Papa.”

Rotheran snorted at the curse, then ruffled his daughter’s hair, “Exactly. It won’t be long now, and we’ll find where they have your mother.”

“It has to be the Constantus bitch! I saw her today! She was leading the raid!” Malindria bounced up and down on the balls of her bare feet, excitement flooding out of her as she contemplated finding her missing parent. “She fled before us and the regiment! They were afraid. She even refused a challenge!”

Her father clucked his tongue, “Fled? No. The Bloody Saints never engage in a fight they have not already stacked in their favor. It meant they had what they wanted, which was probably intelligence. It explains the sergeant’s status. Without the need to fight, she withdrew her troops. She is as shrewd as her father, and I doubt there was a hint of fear involved. If she even heard your challenge, I doubt she cared.”

“But the codes of chivalry...” began Malindria, naivete tinging the words.

Rotheran interrupted his progeny with a simple shake of his head, “As if the Bloody Saints have ever cared for that. Her father’s fate is an object lesson for why they typically ignore them.”

The younger paladin gestured to each side in frustration, “B-but, Nalandiel cared when the Order struck down Severan Constantus! He blinded and deafened every paladin who broke their oath to do it!”

“We are kept to a higher standard, beloved daughter, and I expect you to maintain it. Just because they do not measure up before the Son should not mean we should stoop to their level, as He has been very quick to remind us. Let the Dark Goddess take their souls when the Blessed Lady casts her judgment upon them, but do not give up your own.”

A soft sigh and a nod acknowledged her father’s words, “Aye, Papa. I understand. We must have the strength to maintain our convictions and be true to our oaths, as the Canons teach us.”

“Exactly, my sweet.” Rotheran glanced behind him at the tent entrance, a sudden rustling drawing his gaze. A knowing grin lit his features back up, then he nudged his daughter to bring her attention to it, too. “Hmm. Maybe I’ve overstayed my welcome. I shall return once better news has revealed itself.”

Pulling away from his daughter after one last kiss to her forehead, Rotheran Caulithil strode from the tent, holding the flap open further than needed so another visitor could slip in.

“Young Kellintil, I entrust my daughter to your care once more,” He said with a smile before slipping away.

Wearing the formal attire of a young ensign within the elvish Swan Fleet, Kellintil Foamfollower stole into the tent and then presented a sharp salute to the younger of the two paladins. It was perfectly performed, fingertip to one thin eyebrow, and open palm turned towards the knight of the Order of the Lady’s Guard.

“Oh, please, don’t do that...” Malindria made no attempt to salute in return, instead slipping into Marulami, the tongue of Kellintil’s people, the sea elves. Its structure flowed like waters and rivers, but also allowed for far greater informality.

Foamfollower giggled, then pirouetted, “What, I can’t show off my new uniform?” Gold braids and navy blue ribbons danced as she moved. It contrasted well with her pastel teal skin tone, hair, and eyes, a soft baby blue that matched each other. She was as slender and slight as all her people, barely over five feet in height, even being nearly the same age as Malindria.

“While I cannot deny how beautiful you look in it, Kell,” Malindria rested her hands on the hips of the other elf, “I have to wonder at how we’re affording silk uniforms for an ensign while the kingdom teeters on the edge of ruin and financial disaster.”

“Pfft. We? No, Mama stitched it for me herself! It just arrived!” Kell went up to her tiptoes so she could steal a kiss from the other woman’s lips. It lingered, then the sea elf dropped back down to her normal height, “Mm. I love you, but tell me what one of the masters of your order was doing in your tent, Mal?”

“My father,” emphasized the paladin to her lover, “was reassuring me that I needed to maintain faith through tribulation.” She sighed, “Bad enough that he would need to do that for another knight of the church.”

“We all have misgivings,” the shorter elf offered comfort. Light green fingers, each connected by a thin skein of webbing to the next, smoothed the tunic that Mal was wearing. “What doesn’t comfort me is that I know for a fact that the fleet has been beaching just south of the usual Imperial fleet’s patrol path. Nearly the entire fleet. The Ghontish, too.”

Mal spiked an eyebrow upwards, “What? The entirety of both fleets?”

Kell led the paladin over to the cot in the tent, then set her down. “We’re amassing. There’s only one reason, which is to try to finally sink the Shadow Fleet before the Imperial Armada can arrive to reinforce them.”

The Shadow Fleet had a gruesome reputation. Assigned directly to Noctus as their port of call, each boasted an Imperial storm mage on their decks. Imperial naval might had yet to be defeated on the open waves of the Sea of Scales, regardless of how much of an embarrassment it had always been to the Marulami tribe, who made up the vast majority of the crews of the Swan Fleet. Whether it be lack of coordination with the Ghontish, pride, or any number of other reasons, the Shadow Fleet had always slipped away and then lain in wait until the Imperial Armada arrived from Calexis. An Empire that claimed the fabled hero Iolias as one of its founders had always poured money into shipbuilding, and made fortune after fortune trading silks, spices, and exotics from the Broken Isles due to it. Elven caravels were faster, Ghontish barges more durable, but the Imperial triremes did not want for quantity.

Only once in the conflict had the entire Imperial Armada been amassed, at the very beginning of the war, and it had dealt such a grievous blow to the Galand navy that it had taken years to recover. The Shadow Fleet, always a small flotilla of its own command, had been reinforced many times over, and the rest had returned home to Calexis across the Cerulean Sea. What had remained of the allied navies had been bedeviled for years by the Admiral Praefectus until they had ceased bothered trying. A ruse, as the Galand and Ghontish navies had built and planned in secret.

“There’s only one reason to do that,” Mal’s eyes lit up as she came to the same conclusion as her beloved.

“There’s going to be an assault, and it’s going to be very soon.”

“That’s why father kept saying not to worry! To be patient!” Mal popped back up to her feet, smiling broadly. She gripped both of the smaller elf’s hands within her own as she bounced up and down on the balls of her feet.

Used to the gesture from the other by this point, Kell chuckled and went along for a moment before peeling away. “I wish I had your optimism about this. It’ll go harder than the generals think, by the way I feel the wind blowing.”

That caught Mal’s attention, and she regarded Kell curiously, “What makes you say that?”

“This city. This siege it...” flustered, the sea elf toyed with a bit of braiding on her uniform as she thought of the words. “It’s a pit that Calumnia can use to suck your soul into...”

“You shouldn’t say her name,” warned the paladin gently.

“... but it is! Every time I look at those black walls, it feels wrong. They’ve held us for twenty-five years, a third of our lifetimes, a generation of their own! That city is built to be a vortex of sentient misery and suffering!”

“What do you want us to do, Kell?” Malindria made a frustrated noise in her throat, then settled back on the cot. “I have to find my mother. She’s in

there somewhere, chasing after something she wouldn't tell Father or me about. Not even my elder brothers know!"

Kell looked on the verge of tears, "Negotiate again! Get the giants to mediate once more! At least exchange prisoners so everyone can go home! If there's an assault, I know they'll send in the Guard, and you'll be in the van and... and... It's already terrible that your mother is gone, but a life without you in it? I can't live that..."

"No, hush, no... that won't happen." Malindria clutched the smaller woman tightly against her, one hand rubbing up and down the sea elf's back. Finding herself in her father's shoes, she rocked the tiny ensign back and forth, humming one of Kell's favorite sea shanties under her breath.

She was halfway through re-explaining her father's words when the drums sounded. Heavy and bass, they left the chests of both women rumbling from the percussion. Both started, then darted towards the tent's flaps. The Coalition encampment was alive with motion and activity as the drums rumbled like thunder throughout.

"What is going on, Mal?" shouted the sea elf at nearly the top of her lungs.

As the heavy beat grew in proximity and volume, the great peal of bells was added to it. In distant Noctus, a warning had raced through the city. Even as far away as the Coalition camp, the warning bells of the Black Fortress could be heard. In turn, each cathedral and shrine, even the heretical heart of the Basilica, picked up the call, and Noctus screamed its warnings to its defenders.

Both Malindria and Kellintil looked on in wide-eyed wonder as they saw the source of both the drums and Noctus's panic.

For most of the war, the giants of Dun Moroch had remained neutral. They had tried to mediate several times, each attempt leaving the negotiating table with growing frustration. The last effort had been during the time of Severan Constantus, and the giants had sworn they were done with the whole affair. Longer lived even than elvendom, they had declared they

would wait it out and leave the mortals to suffer the fool consequences on their own.

No longer, as regiments of granite-skinned humanoids marched into the Coalition camp. They varied in height, but none were shorter than ten feet, and their banners stood twenty feet at the shortest. Brilliantly dyed tartans adorned the shoulders and waists of each of them, male and female alike kilted according to the clans of their people. Behind them, massive siege engines were being dragged. Towers, onagers, and even unassembled trebuchets.

After twenty-five years of fruitless siege, the giants of Dun Moroch had ended their neutrality and joined the Coalition. In such numbers, the pair of watching elves had to wonder if there were even any of the beings left in their great mountain fastness to defend it.

Kellintil clung to Malindria's hand, and for what she knew this would entail, she wept harder than she ever had before.

Days spiraled past quickly as the assault was prepared. Gargantuan siege engines larger than most homes had been erected all along the line. Multiple towers had been prepared to trundle up to the walls, each twenty feet higher than the massive basalt structure that protected Noctus from the outside world. Regiments of foot had been tasked with rushing the deep pit that had been dug in front of the city's walls, traversing it, then using hook and ladder to scale the wall beyond.

That was where most of the expected losses would occur. Lots had been drawn to determine which regiments would be first into the fire. Malindria knew it would not be hers, though. She had been ordered to unstable her charger and be ready for a charge through the gates themselves as the Order had formed up into great regiments of foot and horse. They would be the elite shock troops that exploited a breach. She had seen the massive

rams, hewn from great redwoods at the base of Mount Thumnir and carried all the way to Noctus by the giants. Trees that were ancient even by elven standards had been hewn down and reforged for war. Without the dwarves present, their ancient rivals, the giants had decided they would be willing to risk their own lives, was the camp rumor.

It did not sit right with Malindria. Giantish neutrality in all but their spats with the dwarves and orcs had been assured for millennia. They sought to prove their father Thumnir's wisdom in rebelling against Lady Ilia, that He had reformed and changed, and so tried to serve as the father figures to the younger races that they and their divine patron always should have been. Even the battles against the dwarves always seemed half-hearted. A skirmish over a mountain hollow or some ancient shrine in the Heartscrags. They only truly went to war against orcish tribes, which were a pestilence that had fallen away from devoting their prayers to their original father Thumnir to the dread goddess Calumnia. It was the one instance where they would ally with the dwarves once again, to end a larger orcish incursion.

Whatever the cause, they had galvanized the Coalition. Men and women spoke of victory, of going home in months, maybe even weeks, and more than once Malindria had reprimanded a footman or archer she had heard commenting to a fellow about the spoils they would earn plundering the city of their ancient foe.

“I will cut the hands off any thief I find within the city!” the paladin had declared to one, scowling from under her helm. “We are not petty crooks here to steal the livelihood of these people, but liberators! The half-blood bondsmen are our cousins to be freed and given their homes back, and they are not to be harmed! Imperials will see justice meted out by a tribunal of Nalandiel, not butchery in the streets!”

More than once, she had heard the muttering from behind her back after the admonition had been delivered. Self-righteous blowhard was one of the nicer things she had heard herself called after such an encounter.

Knife-eared gash was what some of the Ghontish had said, still clinging onto the old prejudices in their escape from the Empire. The only option had been to ignore them, she was not their commander, and barely counted as an officer within the elven army.

She wanted the waiting to be over. Everyone was on edge, bristling with anticipation and nervous energy. It infected everything and everyone. From the enlisted soldiery plotting how to find plunder in some imagined imperial larder or between a half-blood concubine's thighs, Malindria could not stomach any company but other members of her Order. Only they seemed to have their heads on straight and openly spoke about what they would need to do to keep the men in check. What they were always forced to confront was that there would not be enough of them, there would be fewer after the battle, and there was so much bitterness and resentment that had been built up over the years. Coalition troops wanted to get something out of the decades some of the half-blooded and elven troops had spent staring at those walls, and even the men of the Ghont had started down the same path of resentment.

Kellintil had become a ghost. She stood as attendant to Captain Wavelash, the aide-de-camp to the High King for the Swan Fleet. She was always at his side as he coordinated the upcoming attack. There had not been a real moment for the two to speak again since the giants had arrived. Even when Malindria had tried, Kell could only look away and weep before retreating.

Mal was young, for an elf, at only seventy-nine years old. Barely an adult, but that was old enough for her to know what it meant. Kellintil was already mourning her, expecting most of those who attempted to breach the city to fall. Even as naïve as Malindria had to admit she was, she knew that the death toll of assaulting the walls would be staggering. Nearly fifty thousand combined souls had perished in an eight-hour span during the Battle of the Great Breach, and if it went well, the dead would number in the thousands. Tens of thousands. She could only pray that the majority of them were Imperials. A pile of cruel Bloody Saints, the notoriously corrupt Blackshields, and the personification of Empire, the legionaries. Shatter the

Imperial war machine, capture the city and the lifeline that was its docks, and the castellan of the Black Fortress would be forced to open its gates and face true justice for the crimes of sapient bondage.

On the fifth night, the siege engines opened up as one. Onagers and trebuchets rumbled and roared as the Coalition began work to soften and reduce the enemy defenses. The first several missed, ranging shots as the engineers running the massive machines calibrated and adjusted their aim. Each correction walked the barrage forward a few dozen feet until the first impact landed low on a wall, barely above the foundations. It was where the basalt was thickest, ricocheting the shot into the ditch that acted as a rudimentary obstacle to direct assaults. That first hit brought cheers along the entire siege camp, and signaled the barrage to intensify, less time needed to adjust the targeting. Boulders and stones ripped directly from the ground were hurled hundreds of yards towards the city. Most impacted against the walls and their gatehouses, others fell short, but far more than Malindria would have liked sailed high and into the city proper. Each time she sent a small prayer to the Lady's Son, dutiful Nalandiel, to protect the innocent within.

Out at sea, the allied fleets slipped their moorings and engaged the Imperial Shadow Fleet. The waves were alive with the fire that was traded between massive Ghontish galleons, sleek elven caravels with their swan wing carvings, and the Imperial triremes with their massive ram prows and skilled marines waiting for a boarding action. The Shadow Fleet was experienced and skilled, ruthless beyond measure, with its Admiral Praefectus rumored to have once been a Bloody Saint. It had, more than once, proved more than a match for the elven fleet or the Ghontish. Storm mages cast lightning strikes from the Imperial decks and swamped allied warships with rogue waves, but that was not enough against both navies combined. Marulami sea mages fought back against the Imperials, and heavy Ghontish cruisers were proof against ramming by the smaller Imperial triremes. Over a single night and day, the Shadow Fleet would suffer the worst defeat it had ever endured in a single engagement, one of

their heaviest cruisers having to sacrifice itself to protect the Admiral Praefectus's flagship as they returned to port.

By the tenth day, the battle line was ordered to be drawn. Ghontish and Elven generals rode up and down the lines on horseback and arrayed the regiments. Banners raised for each battalion and blocks of foot, horse, and archer. Giants massed in plate armor thicker than a man's hand, huge mauls hewn of mithril veins perched on their shoulders. Each of the three gates of the city would see a giantish ram crew, and with the Lady Ilia willing, all three would fall.

Each gate held a second gate beyond, a kill zone in between known as the parkam. A dangerous place to be, but if the inner gate could fall, a direct path into the city would be opened. Once inside the city proper, the Imperials would be forced back into the Black Fortress by weight of numbers. Then control of the sea would not matter. They would surrender, or they would starve. Either way, the innocents would be liberated, and the war would be over.

The Imperials would be thrown off the continent of Medraut, never to set foot on it again. They could rot on Calexis for all Malindria cared. Some Ghontish spoke longingly of a return to their home continent, but even the paladin felt that was a fantasy. Ending the Strait Toll for all time and returning Noctus to the Marulami tribes that once owned the land was enough for Malindria.

She let one hand trail over Valor's blonde mane, trying her best to keep the elven destrier calm. He was a beautiful and noble stallion, and Malindria had raised him since he was a foal. It was the duty of all paladins to choose and care for a steed, and Valor had been the one her father gifted to her almost five years ago, chosen from their family's herd. Mithril chain now encased his flanks, and plate covered his head and muzzle.

Nervous energy radiated up from the beast through Malindria's thighs as she gripped tightly to her saddle, even with her attempts. Warhorns and drums had played constantly from the Coalition in an attempt to unnerve

the defenders since the arrival of the giants. Reedier pipes and horns added to the crescendo as commands to advance began all down the line. Towers rumbled forward towards black walls that had been pummeled for nearly a week. The gatehouse over the central gate had collapsed in on itself, and crenels had broken free all along the wall, leaving gaps that were easier to scale or assault.

Still, the great basalt walls and the foundations held. The gates remained closed, even after several direct hits upon all of them. Once more, the bells of the Black Fortress tolled, warning the defenders of the incoming enemy regiments. They need not, as any defender with a pair of eyes could see it in the open daylight.

Only once the Coalition troops were halfway across the field did the allied artillery cease, not so foolish as to bombard their own men.

The Imperials, in return, let fly with everything. Boulders and massive projectiles made of battlefield detritus crashed through assembled ranks and files of Coalition infantry. Men and women were crushed and scattered by their passage. Worse still was when the huge ceramic pots full of Ilian Fire, mixed in among the shelling, would land within a formation of troops. A blinding flash was the only warning that it had occurred; the screams always started shortly after, though. Then came the smoke, followed by the stench. Malindria hated how sharp her senses were during these times, as one of the Hilumani, and at that moment longed for the dullness of human ears and sinuses. One thing that the young elven knight had never been prepared for was how badly war simply *stank*.

Her steed was not the only one of the cavalry regiment's that started when the first report of one of the Imperial cannons was heard. A siege tower exploded, sending shrapnel for hundreds of feet in every direction. It erupted into a pillar of fire as its crew ran screaming and aflame. Ilian Fire consumed even the giants that had been pushing the tower as the siege engine sat and burned, an unmoving flare against the backdrop of war.

Malindria could only watch as the dying had started.

Chapter 3

Desperate Circumstances

Unclean blood is a disease! To be a half-blood is to be guilty from birth! But, let us not be without mercy. Through industry and service to the Empire, a half-blood can redeem their corrupted blood and prove themselves still human. They are the lucky ones, for elves and dwarves and other twisted beings can only serve as penance for the sinful existence they were damned to by their births! – Arch-Bishop Scipio Tertullus, in his address to the conclave before excommunicating the Matriarch of Galandir in perpetuity

Aurelia had spent the rest of the evening after speaking to her mother in the wine cellar. She had emptied a pair of bottles and passed out. Her mother had been right about one thing, though, and that was the wine being shit. It also had a tendency to make for the worst hangovers.

Andolius found her, the half-blood knight clutching one of her father's old doublets to her chest. Both it and the mistress of the house were soaked in her own vomit. A little yelling later, and Daphne had made it to them. The pair helped get her up and out and pried the old tunic from her grasp with

promises to wash it and return it to its proper place in Severan's wardrobe, still stocked with all the clothing that had been in it that last day.

Their mistress received even more care. A bath, then gentle grooming with brush and comb, got Aurelia looking presentable, even as she sat sullenly through the whole of the affair. Even periodic words of encouragement, soft touches of affection and love, or even pressing lips to her forehead and temples did not rouse her out of the fugue. The knight had remained monosyllabic for hours until she formed a real sentence on her own.

She was staring into the mirror in her bedroom, Daphne gently braiding her auburn hair, when she admitted, "I was a fool. I granted Adelaide more familiarity than she wanted, and she turned it around to stab me in the heart."

"Mothers can do that," Daphne warned gently as she finished the braid, tied the end, then began rolling it into Aurelia's customary hairstyle, a bun at the base of the skull. "Our fault entirely, we should've seen to her, but forgot while Andy was trying with me in the afternoon, then when we were, well, seeing to you..."

Aurelia sighed, remembering how good a mood she had been in after having an enjoyable evening. It had left her too casual and relaxed, and she had blundered into the encounter instead of just leaving the food and walking out. "It's not my fault she snuck into my house, assaulted me in my bedroom..."

"Can you blame her for wanting her child?"

Aurelia snorted, remaining still as Daphne inspected her ears for signs of infection or slow healing. Not as skilled as her husband, she was still excellent with a needle and thread. The bondswoman had been apprenticed as a seamstress and served as Andolius's nurse when tending to others in the Half-Blood Quarter while Aurelia was away on duty or in battle. It was where the pair made all their extra coin. "I can blame her for not wanting me when she left the city."

“Well, if she had taken you then, you would’ve never had those years with your father. I don’t think there was any winning there.” Daphne kept her tone gentle. “Would you have traded a moment of your time with Severan?”

“No!” Aurelia’s answer came instantly. “No, I... you know how much I love my father.”

“As if you haven’t told Andy and I a thousand thousand times, Relly,” Daphne gave a soft giggle. “You should let her out.”

“You’ve said that a thousand thousand times, too,” Aurelia turned, no longer looking at Daphne through the mirror but directly at her. “And if she tries to kill me? Hurt you two?”

“I don’t think she’d do either of those things. Her worst weapons are words, and you’ve already proven you can overpower her even when she wakes you from a sleep. I still suspect she wasn’t trying to actually hurt you, just guard against harm to herself when she spoke to you for the first time.”

Daphne poked the tip of Aurelia’s nose gently with a fingertip. “Elves aren’t some great evil or even all that unfathomable. They’re just people. Just like half-bloods are. They get a bit older than we do, are a lot fancier, but other than that... just people.”

“She had a knife to my throat!” protested the manor’s mistress, only to throw her hands up in the air in frustration at the guileless look her servant gave her in return. “Augh! You’re infuriating! But... maybe you’re right.”

“Praise the Lady! The stone wall moves!”

“You make fun, but the Coalition is fracturing, Daph. The dwarves and gnomes have abandoned them. It’s a matter of time...” Aurelia rubbed at her face and stood, starting to feel like a human being again. Her ears were properly docked, she was clean, and she had fresh clothes. As late as she was for the muster, it would be ignored, as she was a Captain, and Vespasian could carry on without her for a while.

“Really?” Blue eyes blinked several times as Daphne regarded her. “Maybe they’ll all just go home?”

Aurelia nodded, a smile finally finding its way back onto her features, “And when they do, and there’s no army camped outside our gates, I can take my mother to the edge of the Treaty Lands and let her go. Everyone goes home, we all live happily ever after. Like Iolias, when he finally got home to his wife. She was named Daphne, too, like you.”

“My name is the only thing my parents gave me before I lost them. I adore it,” the bondswoman clapped happily. “I love that story so much.”

“I know you do, dearest.” Aurelia gifted her friend with a smile, “Maybe tonight, after dinner, I can read you both the part of the story with Iolias and the Cyclops...”

CLANG-DOOM!

Aurelia tensed as the sound of massive bells sounded through the city. Her chest vibrated from the reverberation, thanks to the manor’s proximity to the Black Fortress. One hand instinctively reached for Daphne, wanting to protect the someone so dear to her from any threat that would suddenly appear from the shadows of her own bedroom.

“What was that?” Daphne’s voice was a croak.

“That must have been in error. There hasn’t been an assault in three years...”

CLANG-DOOM! CLANG-DOOM!

The bells grew faster as momentum aided their swing. More bells began to pick up the clarion call and echo from other parts of the city. There was no error.

“Relly, what’s happening?” Andy had appeared in the doorway, winded from sprinting back up from cleaning the mess that Aurelia had left behind over the course of her nighttime adventures. Both of the bondsmen had turned pale.

Doubt, indecision, and worry had faded from Aurelia. All that remained was the Knight-Captain as Relly the half-blood retreated within the warrior that had been forged by serving the Order since she had turned sixteen.

“Something’s wrong. Get me into my armor.”

“Why are you in your armor? Were those the bells of the Fortress?”

Adelaide clung to the bars of her kennel cage, worry etched across her features. All the confrontation had gone out of her when Aurelia had appeared in the full panoply of war.

“They were, and they’re the reason I’m in armor.” Aurelia sighed, “My cohort just sent a runner to fetch me. There’s an assault coming. One last attempt now that the Dwarves have fled, I suppose, but the messenger looked spooked.”

“Then what does that have to do with me? Your pets will go hide in the Half-Blood Quarter with their ilk, and I will starve!”

“No!” snarled Aurelia, fighting hard not to reach down and grip Defiance’s hilt for comfort. “My mother is not going to rot in a cage while my servants hide.”

“Oh, am I your mother today?”

“Infuriating as the truth of it is, yes. I’m going to leave those manacles on, but let you out to accompany Andy and Daphne to the cellar or to the Half-Blood Quarter should a breach be called.”

Adelaide’s expression contorted into a sneer, “What, pray tell me, has galvanized you to action?”

It reminded Aurelia far too much of Julia, and she whipped a hand to slap against the bars just shy of her mother’s nose. With a start, the elf retreated back a step, and Aurelia felt the pressure to lash out fade, “If you think I

had wanted you dead all this time, understand that you are, in fact, still breathing! I never wanted you dead! Ever!"

"Then what the fuck did you want, Aurelia?!" her mother shrieked back at her.

"I WANTED A MOTHER WHO WOULDN'T CUT MY EARS OFF WITH KNITTING SHEARS! BUT THAT IS WHO YOU FUCKING LEFT ME WITH!" Aurelia slammed both mailed fists hard enough into the cage bars that the entire room seemed to shudder with the force. Gouges were left behind in the old rolled iron of the bars, enamel from her armor sticking behind in the wounds of the metal.

"Relly..." came the soft reply, her mother using the familiar for the first time.

Blinking away unbidden tears, Aurelia sniffed. "It's all arranged. Daphne and Andolius will be down with the key, and they'll show you how to get to safety should the time come. If you try to run, those manacles never come off. If I ever see you again, and you ran, I'll kill you. You stay, be calm, and listen to them; you're here when I return, and we'll talk about taking them off. Are we clear?"

Silence ruled the room as the two women stared at each other through the kennel's cage. It was Adelaide who approached the bars again to speak first. She reached through the old iron with one hand and placed her fingertips on the cool steel of Aurelia's breastplate, fingertips tracing over the engraving of the Constantus family crest. "Should you return home safely, you will find me here with your household. Your terms are clear, daughter."

"Did you love him?" Even Aurelia was not sure where the question came from, but asked it anyways.

"With all my heart and soul. It's why I trusted him with your safety."

"Then, at least, we have that in common." Aurelia stepped away from her mother's touch, unable to bear lingering any longer. Her cloak, a billow of

white behind her, as the Knight-Captain turned smartly on one heel and marched out without another word.

Relly had been in her room, reading another section of lolias's adventures through the Broken Isles after the Sundering, when she had heard the explosion. It sounded like Lady Ilia had sent the Celestial City to crash into the world once more. The adolescent half-blood had looked out through her window to watch the great wall of Noctus, that bastion she had been promised would keep her safe, disintegrate. Huge sections of it erupted through the air, and great black stones rained down upon the city, crushing everything in their wake. A great fan of devastation had been sown through the city, an arc of utter annihilation with its source a vast cavern beneath the wall itself, dug out by dwarves and gnomes.

Glass in its windowpane, even so far away, grew the spiderwebs of cracks. Other homes saw their glass shatter completely. Across the way, the home of the Balatius familiy, was crushed by a boulder. A massive black gravestone marked the mausoleum of five of Aurelia's neighbors, including a newborn she had yet to watch play outside.

Her heart thudded in her chest as fear gripped the young girl, and she raced through the house as servants scuttled to and fro in equal terror.
“Father! Father!”

“Relly!” Severan found her near the armory, already halfway into his armor. “Hide in the basement! You know the place! Calthus! Calthus!” He called for his oldest and most trusted body servant, a half-blood old enough that gray had laced through the man’s hair, and he needed spectacles for reading.

“Master Constantus! Ser!” The old half-elf gripped gently, but firmly, onto Aurelia’s shoulders by instinct. He kept the young girl close to his hip.

“They’re not going to get in, but if they do...”

“She’s my granddaughter, Ser, and I won’t let anyone think I’m lying. You freed the bonds of four of my grandchildren, Master Constantus. Your daughter won’t be harmed.”

Severan gave the old servant a firm hug around the shoulders but released him quickly. “I’ll be back as quickly as I may.”

When Severan Constantus walked out of his manor, he gave his daughter one final kiss before leaving, and that would be the last time that Relly saw her father alive. Her last memory of him was his gold cloak billowing behind, a cocky smile on his handsome features. Julia trailed behind him and the Imperial soldiers who had come to fetch him.

The Battle of the Great Breach lasted nearly eight hours, and the entire time, to young Relly, it sounded like the world was ending over and over again. Any moment, she expected Lady Ilia and Her Son to come and take them all away. Her voice was hoarse from the sobs that continuously came, even Calthus unable to soothe her worries and terror with his assurances and gentle touch. His shirt was stained through with her tears and snot where Relly’s face had been pressed most of the day and evening.

When the cellar opened, it was Julia Constantus who came in, not Severan. Her dress was torn, and blood stained its hem. Mascara caked her cheeks from tears that Relly did not know that the woman could even shed. Her hair had been let loose from its normal braids and instead stuck out in every direction, a wild mess.

“Calthus, my husband is dead.” Her voice was hollow as she informed the servant and the other staff that were still there with him, those that had not fled to be with their own families. “Get out and leave me my step-daughter.”

“But, mum, your husband...”

“—IS DEAD! GET THE FUCK OUT! GO CLEAN SOMETHING!” screeched the tiny woman, sending the staff scuttling up and out.

Relly blinked up at Julia from behind one of the wine racks, only to be dragged out by her hair. It left the half-blood screeching, begging to be let go.

“Your... nnf... stop struggling!... your father walked out there like a fool! Just to get himself butchered like the idiot he was! Now he’s dead, and the solicitor has already said you inherit everything. That’s right in his will. I get nothing, and his name dies because my womb is rotten, and half-breeds like you do not get to keep the name.” She shook the terrified girl with every word, dragging her back and forth by her russet locks.

Even with her hair being yanked and tugged, Relly did not miss that Julia had gone to the solicitor before ever returning home to tell the family and staff what had happened. Reaching out, the half-blood grabbed hold of one of the cellar’s pillars. It kept her from being slung about, but the constant pulling hurt like mad. She just wanted to get away, to bawl her eyes out and make the world go away, as she was not able to process that Severan Constantus, the only truly good thing in her life, was gone.

“But don’t worry! I have a solution!” Julia gave a crazed smile as she pulled a pair of shears free from the pocket of her dress with her free hand. “He never declared you! You don’t exist as a bondsman like you should! You never go outside, you have no friends, only rumors that you exist at all!”

Relly’s eyes went wide as she saw the scissors, scrabbling frantically at her step-mother’s grip to try to get away. Blood welled from her scalp as hair attempted to pull up from the root.

Julia’s eyes shone with a feral madness, “A mother can spend her child’s inheritance. You can keep me in the life I have *earned* as his widow, and you can finally be a real person. You can tell people you’re even my daughter, and I won’t correct them.”

“No!” screeched Relly, “Please, no!”

“But it’s just like you wanted! You finally get to be human, like you always wished you were. All I have to do is...” The shears squeaked in anticipation

as Julia worked them open and shut to tease their purpose, twisting the young girl's head to bare an ear.

SNIP!

SNIP!

Attempting to take Trade Street straight to the central gate of Noctus had taken less time than Aurelia had expected. The crowds simply parted for the black armor, and it was not out of respect. No one stood before one of the Bloody Saints when they marched, and Aurelia was glad for it at the moment. She had never been above capitalizing on the gruesome reputation of her Order, only redeemed slightly by her father's tenure as First Knight.

Dealing with the crowds while unable to shake that awful day from her head would not have been pleasant for anyone. Once she reached the inner tower of the Trade Street gate's parkam, she breezed past the Blackshield guards without even announcing herself. The Knight-Captain ignored the stammered attempt at a challenge.

By the time she reached the top and the outer section of the wall next to the gatehouse, she could see what had caused the alarm. Whole clans of giants moved throughout the Coalition camp, each one so huge only their banners dwarfed them. The number of siege engines that the Coalition boasted had more than tripled by what the new formations had dragged up from the faraway Heartscrag Mountains.

There would be an assault, of that Aurelia had no doubt.

She remained between the crenels, watching the camp. Each banner was counted, and she silently worked the numbers in her head of how many they would be facing. Ghontish foot, Giantish shock troops, elven paladins,

Felisan infiltrators, and Nephilim light infantry numbered among the obvious colors that billowed at the forming battalions.

“So... giants, Ser Knight? Ever seen anything like them before?” The voice that approached Aurelia was tinged with the fresh accent of Calexis, likely the capital city of Ilium itself.

Aurelia regarded the man who had approached, his helm tucked under one arm. He had the regalia of a legionary, with the breastplate of an officer, and chased in the black trim of the Nineteenth Legion. The forward bristle of his helm indicated he was a full Tribune, the equivalent of Aurelia’s own captaincy. He was shorter than Aurelia, but not by much, and she was tall for a woman. She could not complain about his features, as they were easy enough on the eyes. Dark hair had been neatly trimmed tight to his head in the legionary style, and he was clean-shaven. Bright green eyes regarded the knight as he awaited her response.

There was a pause as Aurelia considered telling him to shove off, but she had had enough of her own dark thoughts throughout the day. Instead, she decided to see what the man knew already, “I’ve only seen them in picture books before. My father sat at a negotiating table with them a handful of times.”

That seemed to draw the Tribune’s further interest, “Did he? Who was your father?”

Aurelia blinked, as she had made no effort to hide her family crest. It was one of the few things that he could have said that would pull her attention away from the forces massing to the south of the city, “I thought I knew every Tribune of the Nineteenth, but I don’t know you. Who are you?”

He snapped to quick attention, more playful than serious, “Gaius Antonius Lyricanus, at your service, mum.”

“Lyricanus? I don’t see a lyre hanging from your back. Odd cognomen for a Tribune,” Aurelia paced a semicircle around the man, inspecting him. She was becoming dimly aware of other legionaries and their soft snickers as

they, too, were drawn away from the show outside to the growing drama near them.

Confusion fluttered over Antonius's features at the sudden review. He glanced around at the men ostensibly under his command, but none seemed ready to come to his aid, "I, um, my father builds them. Quite skilled at it. Was awarded the cognomen due to his work creating masterpieces for the choir of Ilium's Basilica..."

"... and you must've been apprenticed to him to be allowed the name."

"I was, mum, for a time."

Aurelia paused her pacing. She regarded the small scars and callouses of a soldier that had seen combat, and the easy way in which he wore his sword and kept the tribune's rod not through its traditional hoop, but stuck into his belt where it was easier to get to. It had nicks and gouges up and down its length. "You have an older brother."

"Aye, he'll inherit, so I signed my commission."

"If you're a veteran, why don't I know you?" Aurelia let herself get nose to nose with the man, still openly appraising him like he was a fresh squire in the Order.

Antonius cleared his throat, "Begging your pardon, mum, and all respect to your order, I do not see how you merit an answer to that. Aren't there more important things to deal with?"

The open snickering turned to guffaws at the Tribune's continued inability to understand what was happening. One of them finally broke rank and began to interrupt, "Pardon us, mum, 'e's new to the Nineteenth. Just shipped in..."

Aurelia kept her tone preternaturally calm, "Legionary, I appreciate you attempting to save your captain, but I will kindly warn you off. Antony," she used the familiar for his name, "can take care of himself, can't he?"

Antonius nodded and shooed the attempted do-gooder away, “Aye, I can, and I take it from the men’s reaction you’re someone of note. I’ll answer your question if you reveal yourself, Ser Knight.”

A moment’s regard was given to the Tribune, then a shrug, “Fair enough, but you first, as you were presented with the question.”

“I stood with the Third back home in Calexis. I spent most of my commission fighting in the foothills against the orc clans. Once I mustered out, they offered double to retain my commission and transfer to Noctus. I got here three weeks ago.” Antony gave a broad smile, one hand on his hip as he motioned, “Now the serve is thee, Ser Knight.”

“I am Ser Aurelia Constantus Noctanus,” She did not bother to elaborate further.

“C-c-constantus?” Aurelia’s sparring partner paled visibly.

“Last I checked the name over the door of my home, yes.” With that, the men nearby erupted into gales of laughter as their newly minted officer stepped into the manure pile.

Aurelia let the men have their fun, as she was not sure when the next time they could smile may be. Instead of reprimanding the Tribune as to his lack of knowledge, she decided to see what he did know. “How many do you see, Antony?”

He cleared his throat, one hand tugging at buckles and straps to make sure his breastplate was on straight. Some measure to rescue the meager dignity left in the situation as he stood in the space between the crenels next to Aurelia, “Enough they’re back up to outnumbering us about four to one. When I first arrived, they had barely been at three.”

“What’s Imperial doctrine say about what you need for an assault?”

“Five to one. Six for good measure.” He rested his helm on the top of a crenel, its black bristles flowing in the breeze up so high above the rest of the world. “Giants might shift that arithmetic a bit, though.”

“They might indeed.” She peered forward, letting the sharp eyesight of a half-blood do its work. “You can see the rams right there. Three of them piled together thicker than a pair of ships’ masts combined.”

It was clear that Antonius was struggling to see the same thing as he squinted. After several moments’ effort, he pulled open a pouch and produced a spyglass. “Your eyesight is incredible.” With a practiced motion, he extended the spyglass and peered through it.

“Gift from my mother,” Aurelia murmured, truthfully enough.

“Lady’s Breath, those things are huge. One for each gate, sure enough,” Antonius did not comment on what Aurelia had said, focusing on what he could see.

Aurelia tapped her mailed fingertips on the basalt of the wall, “My father told me that a giant’s skin can barely be cut with blade or arrow. We’ll need plenty of oil and fire, both the normal type and Ilian Fire, to kill any ram crews that dare try for the gates.”

“Then that’s what I’ll make sure my men have on hand should they make a try of it.” Antony stuffed the spyglass back in its pouch.

“Good. Is this gate your assignment, Tribune Lyricanus?”

He nodded once as he retrieved his helm and went about fastening it on his head, “Aye, mum. The Legate Militant has a thousand men assigned to each gate, the Blackshields for along the walls, and the rest of the Nineteenth as a mobile reserve. May I ask where the Order’ll be?”

Aurelia already knew what the answer would be without even having reported to the First Knight. She gave a cocksure grin, “Wherever we’re needed, Tribune.”

The bombardment began five days later. Aurelia watched with Vespasian at her side as the first projectiles landed far short. Ranging shots, the engineers of the Coalition adjusted, and massive chunks of the black basalt and granite that made up most of the region marched closer to Noctus's walls.

Built upon the upper lip of what had once been the outer wall of the crater from when the Sundering had riven the ancient world in twain, the ground's makeup did not match anywhere else on the continent, except for the easternmost shoreline. It was all rock forced up from deep within the planet when Lady Ilia, in her desperation, had sundered the foundations of the Celestial City as her children rebelled against her and cast the city down.

She had not meant to nearly annihilate the world of mortals, but Aurelia knew the gods did not think about singular people when the heavens shook with their pride and their struggles. The ancient empire had vanished in an instant, millions incinerated in moments by the impact. The Arch-Bishop of Ilium preached that the long-lost empire had been of men, and Mighty Ilium was its inheritor. The elves of Galandir, whose Ivory City and capital, was a ruin left behind by the ancients, preached the same about their own people and nation. Whomever had ruled back then did not matter, but the detritus of that past was being flung at Noctus to kill its future and present.

The first successful impact hit low on the wall. Aurelia could feel it rumble up and through the basalt and her legs. Blackshields along the wall gave wary looks to each other, and men began to funnel into the watch towers and gatehouses for shelter. Lots would be drawn to post watch, but no one wanted to have a boulder land on them.

"Time to head down, mum, I think. They have the range," Vespasian warned and began to corral the men and women of the Third Cohort down to the street level for his captain.

Aurelia nodded her approval as she stood and watched. She would remain until all her men were safe. She looked towards the gatehouse door and saw that the Tribune Antonius was doing the same. He was rewarded with

a nod for doing as an officer should, showing courage and care for their troops.

The Knight-Captain was not surprised when the Tribune sauntered towards her, both still on top of the wall as it began to reverberate regularly from the impacts against it. Several watchtowers down, a boulder skipped off the very top, sending a pair of crenels spinning down into the streets below. Aurelia lost sight of the massive rock and prayed it landed only in an empty alley.

“Ser Aurelia,” he greeted with that same smile she had seen the first day.

“You’re supposed to use my full title, nomen, and cognomen,” she reprimanded casually, even as another impact hammered the wall.

He scoffed and let a hand rest casually on his tribune’s rod as he spoke, “Consider it a due reward for calling me Antony in front of the men. They won’t stop now.”

“You don’t use that name?”

“My father and brother do, yes. As do the ladies in my life, including the ones that my men think I have incensed.”

Aurelia let herself smile at him, “I am hardly angry at you. In fact, you banished some unwelcome thoughts with your antics, so I have you to thank, in fact.”

He gave a quick mock bow but straightened quickly to ensure he could keep one eye on the incoming danger. “Then if I have done the good Ser a service, I find myself thankful for it.”

“Shouldn’t you go be with your men in their shelter? I see none remain but the loser of the lottery.” Aurelia glanced over the Tribune’s shoulder at the poor lad who had lost the draw to keep watch during the bombardment.

“I’ll not leave you unattended, nor let it be said I came down before you.”

That forced a laugh out of her, “Have to prove ourselves before the Lady of Courage, do we?”

“Well, that, and I can’t imagine I’d ever live it down to the men if there was too great a gap between us.”

“Ooh, the truth does tell, at last. Pride. A deadly sin that forced the gods to rebel against our Blessed Lady!” She steepled both hands together in front of her chest, in false supplication to the goddess.

“Guilty, may Nalandiel judge me gently for it,” admitted the Tribune.

She placed a mailed hand on his elbow, feeling the steel guard that wrapped it, then turned him gently, “Together, then?”

“Aye, mum, at your pleasure.”

“How’s Noctus treating you?” Aurelia asked as they descended the tower, ignoring the whole war going on outside the structure.

“The men are wonderful. Best part about it. Was surprised to see half-bloods in the Nineteenth.”

“Freedmen, half-bloods that have paid off their bonds to the state. Now citizens, they serve to protect home and family. I doubt they’d accept a commission or enlistment in any other legion,” Aurelia admitted.

“Some of the finest damn soldiers I’ve ever met, too. Ten to twenty years of experience that can’t be matched. I made sure every one of my Primus is one of those experienced half-bloods,” Antony sounded almost proud of them, having declared they made up each of the sergeants in his cohort.

The Knight-Captain paused on the steps, regarding her companion, “It truly doesn’t matter to you?”

“I don’t care what ears a man or woman has if they keep my back safe.” His expression made it seem the most obvious conclusion in the world.

“Antony, there may, in fact, be hope for you yet.” Aurelia found herself smiling from ear to ear as the two re-emerged at street level.

Some men of the Nineteenth were still lingering, waiting for their Tribune. As soon as the pair was spotted, and the smile Aurelia sported, the elbowing and whispering amongst the lot began. Antonius shooed them forward, then laughed, “You’ll have to forgive them. They’re worse than old wives!”

“Oh, I know soldiers, trust me,” the Knight-Captain reassured. Still, she felt buoyed, even as the city was under attack. She could ignore the awful state of her manor and her family and just focus on the immediate future. “Stay safe, Tribune.”

“Aye, mum, at your command.”

“Five days? That was it?”

Aurelia sneered in disgust as she looked back out from the ramparts, the bombardment over. Regiments stretched from one side of the peninsula to the other as they advanced in column and rank towards the walls. Wooden siege towers on their great wheels were pushed forward by giants. Every word had to be shouted due to the never-ending beat of drums and horns from the Coalition musicians.

“Aye, mum!” Vespasian shouted over the din, “No legate worth their salt would think of anything less’n a month!”

“Three for this place, Vespasian! They barely damaged the walls, only happened to knock the gatehouse off the Trade Gate with a lucky hit, the bastards!”

“Makes our job harder, though, dropping rocks and oil on their head with all that rubble!” Vespasian nodded to the pile that had once been the elaborate gatehouse with its reliefs of the Lady and Her Son carved into each side. Now so much broken brick and mortar. Blackshields and legionaries were

shoving the pieces that could move forward to block the gate as quickly as they could.

It would not present much obstacle to a giantish ram crew, in Aurelia's estimation.

The Knight-Captain grunted in acknowledgement of her second's statement, even as the constant drumming drowned it out. As she watched the Coalition's forces draw nearer, she could hear the city's artillery batteries open as men and engines reached the pre-sighted ranges. What the Imperial engineering corps offered in return to the Coalition was far more effective than the desultory bombardment flung at Noctus. Homes and businesses had been torn down, buildings stripped for the precious wood that had to be shipped across an ocean as the city had no further access to the timber of the continent of Medraut. This had been turned into the batteries that would be used to rain pots of Ilian Fire and heavy stone alike upon the Coalition forces.

As if to make a point, the boulders and projectiles that had been flung at the city were hurled back by the massive trebuchets built in the shadow of the walls. A low rumble echoed through the metropolis as each engine roared to life one after the other. Aurelia tracked several of the stones through the air, craning her neck to pivot as they sailed high and then down into the enemy ranks. Whole rows of soldiers were toppled like cordwood, most to never rise again as the first volley struck and the arms of the great machines were winched back into place for the next.

"Only the giants matter!" Aurelia shouted to her second, "All I see happening is pointless death!"

"On both sides, mum! We won't go unblooded, this many making a go!"

"They say the first deaths were an overshoot into the Half-Blood Quarter! A bondsman and his family!" Aurelia found herself rankling at the thought, when she knew better, and it was as likely to be propaganda from the

Basilica as it was to be real. “Killing the people they claim they’re here to save!”

“Self-righteous blowhards, the lot of them!” Vespasian waved an arm out towards the Coalition, still not bothering with his helm yet.

“Theodora’d kill you if she saw you without your lid! But you’re right. Nothing worse than a paladin in my opinion!”

“You’ll get your pound of flesh for what they did to yer father, mum, if’n I don’t miss my guess! We’ll be there to make sure it happens!” Vespasian pounded his breastplate, and several of the other knights nodded in agreement.

The Order of the Lady’s Guard had been the rival order to the Knights of Saint Sanguis for centuries prior to the death of Severan Constantus. Paladins had broken their oaths to murder the Imperial hero and general under a flag of truce during a personal challenge. Since then, no Lady’s Guard was shown quarter on the battlefield. If taken prisoner, a Bloody Saint would drag them aside and execute them on the spot. Each First Knight, since Aurelia’s father had reaffirmed the order to do it.

Aurelia had followed the order more than once and had felt not even the barest hint of remorse for doing so. They all deserved to burn in the Hells for what they had subjected her to by taking her father from her. It made choosing which half of herself to be loyal to all the easier.

WHUMP-DOOM!

Minotaur, the great beast of a cannon on the top levels of the Black Fortress spoke for the first time. The mages that commanded its fire were as accurate as ever, and one of the huge siege towers being wheeled towards the walls erupted into a pillar of flame. Each of the cannonballs the weapon fired was filled with Ilian Fire, which was typically how they menaced attempts to run the strait without paying the toll. A ship that was afflicted with Ilian Fire was dead, and only the drowning remained.

WHUMP-DOOM!

Gorgon fired to match her brother. Named after the long extinct Lamia that had drowned in the Sundering when the Sea of Scales had formed from the flooding that followed the impact, like her sibling, she had bas-reliefs of the mythical monster up and down her bronze casing. Aurelia thought they both were beautiful in their own horrific ways. For the assault, they became terrifying with their horrific nature. This shot skipped short of a siege tower, but bounced through several ranks of Ghontish.

Each man or woman in a line from where it first impacted was scythed down. Either they lost limbs or were simply obliterated. Where the true cruelty came was when it bounced, then again a handful more times, reaping more and more lives, only to roll to a stop near yet another regiment. Its fuse had run its course by then, and the ball detonated. Dozens died instantly, more beyond turned into hideous wrecks of sentient beings as the fire turned them into misshapen lumps.

Even some of Aurelia's knights turned away from the slaughter. She did not blame them or reprimand them. Their worth was known to her, and she knew how horrific this was. During the last assault, each cannon had fired three times, and then the assault had been broken, leaving precious few Imperials dead, but hundreds of Coalition soldiers with lives lost or ruined.

Aurelia forced herself to watch as the cannons fired over and over again. She tried to steel herself to keep her eyes on the horror, but let her gaze falter eventually. It brought her no pleasure, even trying to imagine paladins among those whose lives had been ended. She knew too many were just people, forced into the same situation as her and every other soldier on the wall.

Prayer made its way to Aurelia's keen ears from the men and women on the wall. Lady Ilia and Her Son, Nalandiel, were both beseeched. Calls for strength, for courage, and the wisdom to make it through the battle unscathed. Towers were close enough that the time for prayer had come, so Aurelia decided it was time to step into her own role.

Drawing Defiance, she brandished the shining blade high above her head and shouted above the rising din of the battle, “Men and women of the Third Cohort! I am a Constantus, but I’m one of you first! We are the Third! We are the Knights of Saint Sanguis, and we have never known defeat!”

Knights hammered their shields with the pommels of their weapons as the Knight-Captain continued, “These bastards have taken from us! Our lives! Our lands! Peace! Prosperity! Our loved ones! Now they come to take the last thing that holds us safe! This city! A shithole if I’ve ever seen one! No great shining city on a hill like beloved Ilium. This garbage scow of a metropolis is old, rancid, filled with blackguards and reprobates... I’m looking at most of them...”

That earned her a laugh, and Aurelia powered on, “And by Calumnia’s rotten gash, it sells the shittiest Goddess-forsaken wine I have ever tasted! But this is OUR FUCKING CITY! I was born in this city, just like most of you, and those who weren’t have earned their place! I will spill rivers of blood to let them even dream of tasting that shitty fucking wine!”

Cheers roared out over the sound of shields being hammered again and again. “We are the Bloody Saints, and we will make these bastards fear the name! For Saint Sanguis and the Empire! For our homes and our hearth! For Severan Constantus, and the betrayal that took him from us!”

Each of the knights bellowed out their best warcry as the first ladders and hooks began to rise.

Everything until that point had been prelude, and the bloody butcher’s work had begun.

Chapter 4

The Battle of the Trade Gate

War is a natural state of being. To battle against the enemies of your nation is the easiest path to proving one's courage and strength to the Lady and ensuring a final resting place in the Celestial City. – Canon of the Lady, Imperial edition, Chapter 10 (apocryphal), Verse 2

“Billhooks and axes!” Aurelia ordered, and the knights of the Third Cohort descended upon the next attempt to scale the walls near the Trade Gate.

After floundering through the ditch, an entire regiment had made it up to the wall. Ladders had latched onto the broken and battered crenellations while scaling hooks came hurtling up just after.

The knights waited in expectation, letting the Ghontish get further and further up as Aurelia kept one arm raised while she peered between two of the still standing crenels down towards the ascending troops.

Once the height was enough that Aurelia judged it would cause the maximum damage, she lowered her arm and shouted, “Now!”

Hooked polearms shoved at the top rungs of ladders after cutting away the grips that held them in place. Vespasian and others with heavy axes cut through the ropes held taut to the grappling hooks. Screaming followed as

dozens were sent tumbling back through the air to the broken stones and stakes of the ditch below. Some began to crawl away from the fall, many more were left motionless.

Battles raged the length of the wall. Knights of various cohorts rushed to reinforce anywhere ladders were raised, or a siege tower was able to make the approach and unload its troops. A half dozen of the towers stood as pyres in various proximity to Noctus, a testament to the accuracy of her cannons.

A pair of massive giants pushed another tower into position. The front panel of the tower dropped forward as it reached the edge of the great pit dug in front of Noctus's walls to serve as a ramp forward. Arrows and javelins jutted out of tower and giant alike, leaving them looking akin to porcupines. Neither giant seemed to care as their heavy thews and shoulders finished shoving the tower into place. Once set, the pair retreated and left the tower to the nearest Coalition regiment to rush forward and take the ascent.

"Third Cohort! Form ranks! Kill anything that comes out!" Aurelia ordered as her men began to rank up in front of the siege tower. "Blackshields, I want anything that burns tossed at the wheels and the ramp down there! This thing cannot stand!"

The rumbling thunder of many footsteps shook the tower as it filled with soldiers. Aurelia could hear the shouts and chants as they prepared themselves for the charge. A sharp warcry and an undulated syllable of a guttural language she did not know echoed out before the arm smashed down into the broken crenels that stood ahead of it.

Red-skinned devils poured out and into the waiting knights.

Valor huffed and cantered a handful of steps to show his nervousness. One of the damnable Imperial cannons fired again, and some regiment evaporated on the far side of the battlefield.

Malindria knew that the cavalry was explicitly kept outside the range of the city's guns on anything other than a fluke shot. She still found herself flinching every time they thundered. She was thankful her position was at one flank of the regiment, the far edge so that it gave her space to deal with her errant steed when needed. Hers was not the only mount that had misgivings. Nor was it limited to the horses, as already she had seen several of the men and women remove their helms to vomit.

“Shh. It’ll be alright, boy,” Malindria petted the blonde mane beneath her, and she knew herself to be lying as she said it.

“Bloody work...” came a voice next to her, a rider she had not heard approaching.

“Father!” Mal wanted to reach out and embrace the other elf, but kept firm grip of her reins instead, remembering how skittish Valor had been acting.

“Beloved daughter,” Rotheran had the visor of his own helm open so his face could be seen. He gave her a sad smile, “I just wanted to see you one final time before the heart of the assault begins. Once those gates are open, our entire Order will be going in and finishing this fool affair.”

“We’ll be the van...?” The first inside, the first wave. The greatest glory and the most casualties.

“My regiment will, yes. Your riders will be the final, and hopefully completely unnecessary wave. After that, it will just be whatever is left to exploit the opening and drive the Imperials back into their fortress.”

“Then we find mother. End this. Give so many elves and half-bloods their freedom. We’re doing the right thing, Father.” Malindria dared to let some form of hope bloom within her.

Rotheran's gaze turned away, letting the view of the city and the death on its walls distract him a moment before looking back to his daughter. "I hope so, my dearest jewel. Know that you have made me prouder than anything."

"Don't speak like that, Father. It's almost worse than saying the dread goddess's name." She chided him gently as she patted his hand.

He gave a soft chuckle, "A father's worry." He paused in consideration, then warned, "Remember the Bloody Saints. They will show you no mercy, so give them none. If you see the Constantus woman, just kill her. No parley, no hesitation. It is the only thing that may save your life."

"You can't even be sure we'll see them..."

"Don't forget that warning, my beloved one. Nalandiel light your way!" He spurred his steed, then called out to the assembled cavalry, "May the Lady and Her Son guide you all and grant you the strength to do what you must! For the freedom of all Medraut and an end to Empire!"

Assembled paladins raised their lances in a cheer that rang through their ranks. Malindria tried her best to match the enthusiasm of her fellow knights. It rang hollow to her own ears, and she lowered her lance well before the others.

Instead, all she could do was watch as death stalked up and down the ebon walls of Noctus.

Nephilim infantry crashed into the line of the knights of the Third Cohort. Men and women of the Nomad Kingdom glittered with jewels in their horns and hair, gold about their tails and ankles assaulted them. Descendants of those whose families had dealt with the dread goddess Calumnia and the lords that served Her. Exiled from whatever homeland had spawned them,

they had become the gypsies of Medraut, eventually joining the Coalition to prove their worth to the other sentient races.

Aurelia speared one charging devilkin on the tip of Defiance. A quick kick sent the corpse back into its fellows to stagger the charge. With a sideways flick, she took much of the jaw off another, sending it screaming in pain and allowing Tertius's mace to crush the woman's skull.

The Knight-Captain nearly missed one leaping high above the others, daggers flashing, only to see Vespasian catch the devilkin by his flailing tail and yank hard to one side. The Coalition soldier yelped, then proceeded to be hurled bodily off the side of the wall by the massively built Vespasian. The scream that followed lasted interminably, but its finality was short and sudden as he found gravity and the cobblestones below unsympathetic to his plight.

"Thank you, Vespy!" Aurelia shouted before cutting another of the red-skinned soldiers down.

He chortled at how he had disposed of the devilkin, then produced a globe of Ilian Fire from his pouch. A quick nod to Aurelia was all it took to tell her what his plan was.

"Shields up and drive them back! *Percute!*" The Knight-Captain brought her own shield up with such force into a nephilim's jaw that she saw teeth crack. Her victim spat his own lip ring out at her, but his eyes went wide as he realized what was happening.

Together, the knights were shoving the Coalition infantry back into their own siege tower. It stacked them up, the ones on the bridge that led to the top of the basalt wall being crushed between their advancing fellows and the inexorable drive of the armored wedge of knights.

Once lit, the ceramic globe sailed over the heads of the Third Cohort and deep into the back of the siege tower. It only took moments before flames were racing up and down the wooden structure. Planks and timbers had

been stained and hardened to resist flame and heat, but nothing resisted the alchemy of Ilian Fire.

“Push them back! Let them burn in the fires of the Hells like their ancestors!” Aurelia screamed the cruel order to her knights. She could only imagine how her cohort looked to them. Black armored devils in their own right, backlit by the morning sun still low in the East, forcing the Nephilim into their own pyre.

Combat turned to slaughter as devilkin sought the peace of the blade instead of the horror of fire. Those few that made it to the top were cut down, leaving the rest to be devoured by the heat and smoke. The ramp beneath the tower caught, and by the end, the great engine listed to one side, then toppled over to turn it into a crackling sepulcher.

None of her knights had fallen, and Orthio was flitting from man to woman to ensure that each remained in fighting form. Only the occasional Blackshield or militia member lay still upon the wall, with most of the deaths being those of the Coalition. The Knight-Captain scoffed for a moment, almost thinking it too easy.

She had not seen the real threat, distracted by the tower and its devilkin. Bass, staccato chants roused her and propelled her towards the ruins of the Trade Gate’s gatehouse. A full phalanx of giants approached, and as they neared, the heavy ram could be seen braced between their powerful arms. It was fifty feet in length at least, and nearly ten wide. A huge bronze boar’s head had been mounted upon it.

The giants themselves were in beaten plate armor thicker than the span of a hand, the colorful tartans of their varied clans hanging about their waists. Massive shields protected the giants on each flank of the phalanx, and they held them up in mimicry of the Imperial legion’s famed testudo formation. Already, javelin and arrow festooned the shields.

“Ram crew!” bellowed Aurelia. She could hear the nearest Tribunes and Centurions of the Nineteenth calling the same.

Piping hot oil, bubbling and smoking in its pots, was dragged and lugged into place. With the collapsed gatehouse, they had no easy access to matriculations to pour it down upon the attackers, but instead had to leverage scalding hot bronze pots up over rubble and ruin. Several Blackshields screamed as oil sloshed over them, staggering away to be replaced by more men.

“Put your bloody backs into it!” screamed Antonius. He held his rod of office high in one hand, and blood caked it from having been used as a cudgel.

“*Aon! Dhà! Tri!*” was the chant in giantish before the first hit hammered into the Trade Gate. Ancient oak shuddered within its frame.

Even the walls vibrated, and it nearly sent Aurelia spilling to one side. The impact was far harder than anything she had felt when the artillery had been pounding the city’s walls. She saw other knights and soldiers bracing, showing they had felt it, too. A pit started to form in Aurelia’s stomach, the earlier brazenness gone.

Oil cascaded down, dousing the van of the giantish crew. Expertly aimed fire arrows trailed just behind, and massive humanoid forms erupted into flame. Others screamed and staggered away, being cooked inside their armor by the burning hot oil. More were there to take their place, though.

Other knights with the orbs of Ilian Fire rained them down on the giants, reaping more casualties. Corpses upon the ground before the gate proved they could die, even as arrows and quarrels did little to them.

“*Aon! Dhà! Tri!*” and again the gate shuddered. It made disconcerting noises, the sounds of metal ripping and warping.

Aurelia was certain she would never forget what the giantish words for “One! Two! Three!” were after the day’s events. Desperately, she searched up and down the wall for any reinforcements that might be coming. Scaling ladders and towers had engaged nearly every section of Noctus’s outer defenses. Her knights, she knew, were the reinforcements should the gate open.

Another pour of oil and more giants fell. Broken masonry made the go of it slow and inefficient. Pots had to be dragged up from the base, where the furnace was, instead of raised by the dumb waiter that existed within the gatehouse normally, as it had been blocked by the shattered housing.

If a gate were to fall, it would be the Trade Gate, Aurelia determined. Without a ranged weapon to contribute, she instead walked along the upper crenellations of the parkam. Better to appraise what was to come than get in Tribune Antonius's way while his legionaries and their attendant Blackshields did their work. Vespasian trailed behind, a black ghost with his crimson cloak coated in soot and ash.

Another strike impacted as she reached the halfway point. A great wrenching sound came from the Trade Gate, followed by what sounded like a miniature version of a cannon's report. A bracket that held the great steel bar of the Trade Gate in place had been fired across the parkam like a bullet. On the far side from Aurelia, it had embedded itself into the basalt wall.

"Mum? What're ye thinking?" rumbled Vespasian, not having to yell quite so loud to be heard.

"This is where they're coming through. Once this gate is open, every giant they have is coming this way to make sure the inner comes down, too."

Another impact, the steel locking beam bent at nearly a forty-five degree angle.

Vespasian flinched at the sight of it, then nodded, "Aye, mum, I reckon you have the right of it."

"Once that gate opens, Lady help us all, then it's a real fight."

In the first days of the war the Trade Gate had been shut and locked. It stood as the largest of the three great gates of Noctus, more than half again the size of the Foundry Street or Half-Blood Gates. It led straight down the heart of the city towards the Black Fortress and had been the first gate erected when the walls were constructed.

Too large to be safe to open for sallying or raiding, the Trade Gate had been shut since those early days when the Treaty Lands were razed and the city invested. Even in the Battle of the Great Breach, it had remained shut.

After twenty-five years of siege, the Trade Gate of Noctus was rent off its hinges by one final heave of a giantish ram crew and sent tumbling into the cobbles with a great crash. For a second, the world sat still and silent, the din of battle reduced to a low hum as Aurelia watched the giantish crew caw out their exultations of success. They stepped over their fallen brothers and sisters, one even pausing long enough to collect brooches from the fallen's tartans, then the giants were advancing once more, through the parkam.

The horns of Galandir and the trumpets of Tor Ghontir sounded, commanding the army of the Coalition to advance as one, every reserve committed. The bells of Noctus screamed their warning, and all along the wall, the call was made, voices rising in terror.

“BREACH!”

The Knights of the Order of Saint Sanguis assembled directly ahead of the Trade Gate. It shuddered and rumbled from the ram crew operating in the parkam.

Aurelia had never given a thought to trying to stop that many giants after seeing already how impervious they were to anything but fire. Instead, they would have to hack the legs out from underneath them, then ram blade and steel through eye slits and soft joints. It would be bloody business, but she knew the knights would have to kill as many as they could before they fell to give the Nineteenth and the Blackshields a chance.

“Like any armor,” she called out to her knights, “It’s weak in the joints, neck, and eyes! Take out the tendons of the ankle and then jam a sword somewhere soft!”

She let the legionaries of the Nineteenth, who were also assembling, hear her words. If any soldier could help, she wanted them to. Stalking up and down the line, she made last-minute equipment checks, gave what words of reassurance she could, and let Orthio lead one final prayer to the Lady Ilia.

When she got to the end of the line, it was Antonius standing there to Aurelia’s surprise. “Shouldn’t you be up above on the parkam, supervising the defense?”

“I have a centurion I trust doing that. I’ll not leave my men to die to something I dare not face myself.” Gone was the cocksure, cheerful attitude. He met Aurelia’s eyes, and she knew he meant it.

She nodded, impressed, “Good form, Ser Tribune. Good form, indeed.”

Hurrying, she returned to the heart of the Imperial line, where the Third Cohort stood in two ranks, backed by growing numbers of Imperial legionaries and their heavy shield wall. The entire Imperial line braced as one while the inner gates cracked, then bowed inwards from the gargantuan might being hammered against them.

When the inner gate of the Trade Gate’s parkam collapsed inwards, Aurelia had all but forgotten about Gorgon and Minotaur. She had long since lost track of their fire and how frequently they could contribute to the battle. Warned by runners from the Nineteenth what was under way at the Trade Gate, the mages who commanded the cruel beasts had waited for their shot.

Down the only straight avenue in Noctus, Trade Street, one cannon fired after the other through the fallen gate and straight through the parkam. Aurelia felt the superheated backblow of the shot going directly over her head. She could see the horse hair tails on the legionary helms singed

short with how low and how close the shots had come to decapitating their own troops.

The moment where giantish faces leered through open-face helms down at the Imperial line lingered in Aurelia's mind. With the great ram discarded for them, the giants were in the midst of pulling forth massive mauls and axes to crush and split apart the shorter soldiers in front of them. Already, the parkam was lousy with Coalition soldiers, and the pennants of Lady's Guard streamed behind the ram crew.

Cannon shot tore through all of them. Magical and mundane alike were reaped in a grisly toll. Giantish flesh parted like water before a trireme's prow as first one, then a second cannonball did the butcher's work that they had been designed for. One ball careened back and forth between the twin basalt walls of the parkam before exploding, the other impacted flat directly into the open center of the parkam. Both erupted into maelstroms of Ilian Fire, turning the parkam of the Trade Gate into one of the largest furnaces ever witnessed by man or woman.

"By Calumnia's rotten gash..." Aurelia found herself muttering as she stared at the charnel pit that the parkam had been transformed into.

Up and down the line, some wept, others leaned forward and retched onto the cobbles of Trade Street. Most cheered at the show that they had just seen. What seemed like doom incarnate had evaporated in so many moments thanks to Imperial ingenuity and alchemy. Nothing appeared to have survived the enfilade, not so much as a single giant staggered through the flames and the heat.

Legionaries and Order Knight alike were congratulating each other, others giving thanks to the Lady and Her Son. The men were relaxing as they celebrated, growing sloppy, and the shield wall was breaking up. Aurelia felt her shoulder slapped by some knight or another; she did not register which. It was what she heard that she was paying attention to.

Ignoring that no human would have caught it over the din, but thanks to her mother's gifts, she heard the chanting. Holy chanting in chorus that only the Lady's Guard would do mid-battle. It gave her a moment that no human could have had, and she seized it.

“Shield wall! Now! SHIELDS UP!” screamed the Knight-Captain at the top of her considerable lungs. She then added for the sake of the legionaries, “*TESTUDO!*” She could hear Antonius repeating her commands.

Chanting transformed into thunder as hooves pounded over battered cobbles and shattered bodies. Cloaked in the magic of their Order, chargers of Lady's Guard barreled through the smoke, flame, and death. Lances dipped, and tens of thousands of pounds of rider and steed plowed into the Imperial lines.

Chapter 5

Into the Cauldron

For those souls who have failed our blessed Lady, they are banished into the Hells. For them, She gives but one commandment: burn. – Canon of the Lady, Chapter 9, Verse 6

For a moment, Malindria allowed herself to hope.

The great central gate with its red-stained wood had fallen, giants leading the way. Horns and trumpets shouted exultation, and the entire army had surged forward. His Second Regiment of Royal Lancers, which Malindria's squadron had been formed into, trotted to the pitted remains of what once had been Trade Street, descending all the way south to the Consul's Knot, the crossroads that led this way and that from Noctus to the interior of Medraut.

With their pennants flying, the heart of the Order of the Lady's Guard followed the giantish shock troops into the parkam of the Trade Gate. She could just make out her father's personal colors leading the charge, given the glory as one of the most decorated masters of the Order, second only to the Headmaster himself.

Pushing up, she stood in her stirrups and watched while the regiment idled. A prayer remained on her lips, exhorting the Lady Ilia, to grant her father the courage, the wisdom, and the strength that were Her domains. She did not ignore dutiful Nalandiel, Her Son and guardian for whom the Order took their name, and begged him to provide protection to all those who fought for freedom from the Imperial yoke.

Her prayers were in vain. Keen elven senses let Malindria see the puffs of smoke from the Black Fortress's upper galleries before she heard the thunder of the shots. Both cannons had fired nearly at once, and their shots had been perfectly aimed through the parkam of the Trade Gate.

Hope blossomed into horror as the fires of the Hells themselves raged within the courtyard of the Trade Gate of Noctus. Flames licked higher even than the black basalt of the walls, smoke billowing out to cover the entire battlefield in a haze.

“Madmen!” screamed one of the paladins of the regiment. Others followed suit.

A miss could have shattered their own walls or massacred their own defenders. The Imperials had gambled with their very existence.

Worst of all, they had won the roll of the dice.

Rage flowed through the regiment, but Malindria felt none of it. Her mouth had gone dry, and she felt like she could feel her heart thudding in her throat. Had she just watched her father die, she wondered, and worried that she already knew the answer.

This is what Kellintil warned me about, the paladin thought to herself. She knew knights of the holy orders were supposed to never question, to never think beyond their faith. It was without a doubt that she was failing in that regard.

“She was right to mourn,” whispered Malindria to no one but herself, as she realized she wanted, desperately, to be anywhere other than Noctus. She wanted to see her mother and father again, to hold her lover once more in

her arms. The walls loomed dark and cruel ahead of her, taunting her with her powerlessness.

Instead of withdrawal, the color sergeant sounded the note to advance in rank. Malindria obeyed automatically as the regiment stepped as one. Hundreds of heavy horse moved forward, to what end the knight could only guess.

As they neared the gate, she could see men and women staggering away from the carnage. Flesh had been melted into steel from the heat of the Ilian Fire that had wreaked its havoc. Even giantish corpses lay reduced to so much charcoal within their armor, now slag running in rivulets away from the corpses. She could see the pennants of her order burning, their bright, cheerful colors reduced to so much cinder.

Another note played, this one to order the divine invocation of Nalandiel's blessing. Every paladin in the regiment at once began to pray, even Malindria. She hoped her doubts would not leave cracks in the divine protection, shouting louder than others in hopes volume would make up for it.

Flames parted for them as Nalandiel held the heat and fires at bay. He did nothing to prevent the horrors from embedding into the souls of the elven knights. Men and women fused together in mithril armor reduced to so much ruin, fingertips embedded into basalt walls as they attempted to claw free of the massacre. Walls that had begun to ooze tendrils of basalt down over the bodies due to the heat. Limbs of giants scattered hither and to, torn apart by the initial impacts of the cannon balls. What might have once been the great bronze head of a boar, from the ram, had half sunk into cobbles that had turned into magma.

Without Nalandiel, this place would have been the death of them all. The parkam was what Malindria imagined the Hells looked like. That place where dreaded Calumnia, the Goddess of Hate, Misery, Discord, and Deception reigned supreme. Only her work could have caused such monstrous carnage.

Whatever defenders had been above the parkam had retreated. The heat prevented any attempts at defense or the ability to rain down whatever ranged attacks they could muster. A small mercy that Malindria barely registered.

Fifty yards. That was the total length of the parkam of the Trade Gate. It felt like fifty miles to the paladins of Lady's Guard as they trotted through, their magics barely holding back the heat and the flames.

As they neared the center, the color sergeant played the order for the charge. Steeds were whipped to full gallops and raced over corpse and cobble alike through the far gate and into the open streets of Noctus itself. Whatever the cost had been, they were inside, and no regiment had successfully stormed a Noctan breach since the war's inception.

Lances dipped, and Malindria only had moments to register what awaited them. Multiple centuries of legionaries had just locked shields into their famed testudo, a shield wall festooned with the points of pilum spears. At their very center, she could see them, the black knights of the Bloody Saints, and at their core was the upraised fist of the Constantus family.

Her mind had barely put the thoughts together when steed and steel crashed down upon the Imperial lines.

Something hit Aurelia square in the chest, a lucky shot coming in over top of her shield. Her breastplate had turned the blow, though, and the lance tip caught in the edge of a pauldrone. It sent the rider catapulting far over her head and into the loving embrace of dozens of legionaries. Mithril-clad chargers crashed through their formation and split apart the knights and the rest of the Imperial lines.

It turned the combat into little islands where the Knight-Captain could hardly see her fellows. Her chest burned from the impact, but she was able to get her blade up and into the belly of one of the white chargers, gutting

the creature out from under its rider. Defiance flashed again, and she took the paladin's head off as his beast collapsed underneath him.

"Knights! Rally to me! Push to my voice!" bellowed the Knight-Captain.

She blocked a blow on her shield and forced it aside. Thrusting with her blade, she aimed square for the center of a mithril-armored chest. Elven arrogance turned to surprise on the paladin's face as the powerful enchantments on Defiance parted the mithril and the flesh beneath as she speared the paladin. Kicking the corpse away, she pushed past until she was once more shoulder to shoulder with Vespasian. He was holding off a paladin that had remained mounted.

Aurelia cut a back leg out from under the mount, sending it spilling to the ground. Vespasian wasted little time chopping down into the paladin with his axe, old-fashioned steel and muscle taking much more effort to batter its way through mithril plate, only stopping when the twitching ended. His final chop was into the throat of the beast, ending its own misery.

"Mum!" he acknowledged, but kept his breath reserved for hacking into more of their attackers.

Together, they dove deeper into the swirling melee.

Malindria did not know how long she had been on the ground or where Valor had gotten to. All she knew was that one of the other paladins had dragged her away from several Imperial legionaries.

She unlimbered her longsword from her back as her fellow knight held them off. Once armed, she lent her arms to his aid, cutting down a pair of the legionaries. What gave her pause was seeing the pointed ears on one of the fallen men's ears. A half-blood legionary, dead at her hands.

Her gorge rose, and it was everything she could do not to retch as she backpedaled deeper into her own formation. Malindria knew she needed to

get a hold of herself before she panicked. Gripping the symbol of Nalandiel she kept hanging at her belt, a small bronze trinket in the shape of a hoplite's shield, she prayed for guidance and strength.

It calmed her, and she focused on what she could do to help. As a novice, her skills were not powerful, but she channeled what little healing magic she knew into a paladin nursing a mangled arm. He nodded in thanks and dove back into the fray. That accomplished, she turned towards the sound of someone bellowing in the Imperial tongue. An officer or centurion she could kill to aid in the attack.

It was an officer, but it was no centurion. At the center of the line, directing her knights, was the Constantus woman. The family her mother had posed as the slave of just before the siege of Noctus had begun. If anyone knew where Lilandria Caulithil had vanished, it would be the Constantus.

She also remembered her father's final words to her, to simply kill the woman if she had the chance. Praying he would forgive her, she pushed towards the Bloody Saint and the men around her.

Her Imperial was thickly accented, but her mother had taught her well enough to be understood, "Constantus! Stand to attention and tell me what has been done with my mother!"

One of the knights loomed large ahead of her, a human brute with a flanged mace for a weapon and a shield with an anchor on its face. He grunted loudly as he tried to bring the mace down on Malindria's head.

The paladin caught the head of the mace in the crossguard of her pommel before turning it aside. Twisting the blade, she came up and thrust the tip just under the helm of the knight. One good push sent the mithril longsword out the back of the knight's neck, and the human toppled and fell away.

That earned the Constantus's attention as she roared in anger at seeing one of her men fall. She leapt forward at Malindria, and the paladin barely blocked the blade in time to save her own neck. The force of the parried attack reverberated along her arm, and it had been strong enough to leave

a scar along the edge of her mithril sword. A blow followed from the shield, a flat smack into Malindria's breastplate that sent her staggering.

"I remember you," growled the Bloody Saint as she stalked the paladin. Her visor was worked to look like the Lady Ilia's visage. A heresy that lent the black knight an inhuman quality, giving her an air of one of the Lady's statues come to life, corrupted by the Dread Goddess.

"Where is my mother!? Do you have her!?" screamed the paladin, hoping to at least know before her own doom fell upon her.

Constantus's helm tilted, as if she were considering something, then she shrugged before pressing once more upon Malindria. Blows so fast that Malindria barely got her guard up in time, rained down one after another. She found herself pressed against another paladin, no longer able to give ground to the black knight.

It was the color sergeant, horn discarded, who she had found. A pile of legionaries lay dead at his feet, and he turned to engage Constantus as soon as he saw her. "Go, Caulithil!"

Malindria staggered away, letting Constantus and the color sergeant engage each other. Their blades crossed, and the far more experienced paladin was able to hold his ground against the white-cloaked Saint. More paladins flooded past her, obscuring her view of the fight.

Chaos and death stalked the streets of Noctus as Malindria found herself separated and shoved between a pair of buildings. She watched a paladin fall, an arrow through an eye from a rooftop somewhere. Another pair fell together, hacked apart by an entire maniple of legionaries. Imperials were arriving from every direction, reinforcing the breached gate a dozen times over. With the cauldron of Ilian Fire lit behind them, the paladins were cut off and alone within the city.

Malindria found herself staggering down an alleyway, bleeding from a cut she did not even know the origin of.

She desperately wanted to go home.

“Four dead, five gravely injured.”

Vespasian held a tally sheet in one hand. His left eye was swollen shut and covered with a bandage due to a kick from a dying charger at one point. All of Orthio’s magic had been spent to stabilize the wounded, and Vespasian was considered still battleworthy by the triage of the afternoon.

“Nearly half the cohort,” grunted Aurelia. She was not without injury, as her chest burned with every breath, and she imagined the bruising would be severe. A blade had gotten under her helmet from the Lady’s Guard’s color sergeant, and she would have a new scar on her chin to add to her others. She had still spitted him on her father’s blade.

“Could be worse.”

“Where’s Tertius?” Aurelia refused to be mollified, looking instead over the ruins of the Trade Gate and the battlefield in the middle of the main street of Noctus.

“Lost his left hand. Arguing with Orthio about whether he can just clamp a shield to that arm and keep going.”

Aurelia had to fight off the smallest of smiles. At least Tertius was still Tertius. “Tell Orthio that he just picked his nose with that hand anyways.”

Vespasian gave a raw chuckle, then turned serious once more, “Fool paladins coming through when they were completely cut off. Only an order that bloody arrogant could throw lives away like that.”

Aurelia pushed to her feet from where she had been squatting and stretched. Joints protested and creaked, and she could swear she had just turned fifty-nine and not twenty-nine. Everything hurt, and the lack of adrenaline was not helping.

“I’m going to go on a walkabout and stretch.”

“Mum, there could be scattered elves anywhere down these streets,” Vespasian warned.

“I think I know what to do with a paladin, Vespy,” Aurelia secured her helm to her belt and unpinned her bun, letting the braid trail down her back.

“I reckon ye do, mum. Saw enough of that already.” He shrugged, his heavy shoulders rolling under his battered black plate. “Yell if’n ye need us, mum.”

Aurelia patted one of those shoulders affectionately as she stepped past the pile of dead elves that had been dragged together in front of the Trade Gate. Each one of them had already had their ears carved off, a pile made to collect the bounty. It would be the Tribune’s job to make sure his men got an even cut, and Aurelia had spotted some of her cohort lopping a few off here and there. For some reason, she had no stomach for it that day and had already waved off any attempt to share with her. Too many shouted questions about someone’s mother had left the irritating thought of her own scratching at the back of her mind.

Whatever had been left of the gatehouse had melted to slag and fallen into the parkam, effectively re-sealing the gate. Any strength that had been in the assault had fled as the horns of Galandir had called the retreat after several hours of fighting along the walls. It had left both sides with a bloody nose, and there were rumors of a parley between one of the Ghontish generals and the Legate Militant of the 19th going on outside. There could be a temporary truce to recover bodies and bury the dead. Neither side wanted disease to become a worse problem than it already was.

The Knight-Captain let her mailed fingers trail over old buildings and structures. Those civilians who had lived nearest the walls had fled. Most structures closest were abandoned long ago, though, as living nearest the wall was asking to have something dropped on your head. Any businesses that relied on trade had long since failed and been left to rot. Near the gate, there were old taverns, inns, bunkhouses, and stables that were all just rotting away. At best, they would eventually be plundered for the wood and

nails they had been made from, repurposed into anything from a siege weapon to repairs for the vital docks.

Aurelia paused when she saw the blood trail. Something had bled its way through the back alleys she now trod, and it was still a bright carmine color. Drawing her sword, she kept track of the droplets until she followed them into what appeared to have once been a bunkhouse or inn. No furniture remained inside to indicate one way or the other. There was a door to a back room, a rotting sheet hanging as a divider from a wooden rod.

If there was to be an ambush, this is where it would be, in Aurelia's estimation. Edging forward cautiously, she used the tip of her sword to push the sheet to one side, left hand up defensively even though her shield was still slung under her cloak. To Aurelia's half-blood ears, it might as well have been the bells of the Fortress for how loud it sounded. Any elf would certainly hear it.

When an elven paladin leapt out after her, she was not surprised. She parried a pair of clumsy blows, the knight clearly exhausted. Aurelia slammed the hilt of her blade hard into the side of the paladin's helm to ring their bell, then gave a hard slap to the elf's blade, sending it spinning across the floor.

Defeated, the paladin sagged. "Just tell me where my mother is before you kill me."

Aurelia had to stop the forward stab of her sword, ready to end the elf without a second thought, when she registered the words. Defiance hovered perilously close to the paladin's throat before Aurelia had arrested the thrust, but was able to lower the blade. Instead of killing the paladin of the Lady's Guard, she actually took a look at the other knight.

The elf's stag head and crossed sword tabard was soaked with blood down one side and caked with soot from charging through the parkam. It was the same one from the raid, and the one that had killed Gracchus before screaming about her mother at Aurelia.

Even though she knew better, Aurelia demanded of the elf, “Take off your helm.”

“What?”

“Do it!”

With a sigh, the paladin pulled off her mithril helm and let it clatter to the floorboards. When she looked up at Aurelia, meeting the other woman’s gaze, it was a mirror image of her own mother. Midnight hair, bright blue eyes, and even the beauty mark on her chin that Aurelia shared with the woman she knew as Adelaide. Her ears were perfect knives, a full-blooded elf.

Aurelia felt like she had been punched in the stomach as she backpedaled away. She wanted to scream. She wanted to throw up. She wanted to demand answers. All of it flooded into her at once as she stared at this other woman, this creature that had infiltrated her city from the outside world.

“Well, aren’t you going to at least tell me?” demanded the elf in her accented Imperial tongue. Too nasally, too lilting for the normal sound of it.

“I... I...” Aurelia stammered as all her confidence fled.

“Answer me, you blackguard! Where in the Hells is Lilandria Caulithil!?” The paladin shouted as she straightened, and fire returned to her once more, sensing Aurelia’s discomfort.

“Lilandria?” Aurelia blinked owlishly. Somewhere in the back of her mind, the word ‘liar’ repeated itself over and over. “Not Adelaide? Not Adelaide Yarathil?”

It was the paladin’s turn to pause and blink, “You never figured out she was a spy?”

Aurelia realized she had not even known her own mother’s name. It had only been a moment before she had killed what may very well be her sister.

She was exhausted, and she could see that same weight on the elf's features.

"How did you even survive?" Aurelia squatted to retrieve the blade of the paladin from the floorboards. It was finely wrought, the stag's head etched into the blade by an artisan's acid. It barely showed any wear from use, except for the notch that she herself had put into it, which inclined Aurelia to believe its owner had a similar quality.

"I... I got separated," the young paladin sounded defensive as she clutched her side, blood still periodically dripping to the floor below.

"Uh-huh." Aurelia did not believe it for a moment, but also did not think pressing would generate a productive result. Instead, she stood and made a mock bow, "Ser Aurelia Constantus Noctanus, but you likely already knew that. Your name, ser?"

"Ser Malindria Caulithil, daughter of Rotheran and Lilandria," scowled Aurelia's opposite at the false cordiality. "Why haven't you killed me yet? Bloody Saints don't show paladins quarter."

"For good bloody reason!" snapped Aurelia. "I've always wanted to know... how many paladins did Nalandiel strike down for breaking their oaths that day?"

Malindria shuffled nervously before mumbling a number so faintly that even Aurelia did not hear it.

"Come now. Say the truth loudly, so that the Lady and Her Son can hear it."

"Four. Your father killed two, then the other four were struck deaf, dumb, and blind for it."

"Hah!" Aurelia smirked broadly, "I bloody knew it!"

"You've had your fun, blackguard! Are you going to keep mocking me and my order? Parade me up and down your central street before beheading me?" Irritated defiance filled Malindria's voice, her fists balled up as she shouted at Aurelia.

The Knight-Captain snorted, “Lady’s Breath, I’m not going to do any of that.”

“Why not? I know the High King would certainly do it to you should you be taken captive.”

“As special of a feeling as that gives me in my heart, I am not that level of ridiculous,” Aurelia shook her head.

“Then why? Why does this conversation make any sense at all?”

Aurelia gifted the woman who might be her sibling with a roll of the eyes, “If you can’t figure it out looking at my face, then you don’t need to know just yet. Tell me, how long have you been a knight?”

“I, um, why does that matter?”

“Just answer. In return, you may ask a question of your own with an equally honest response.”

Malindria scowled and fidgeted, giving away the answer was not one she was proud of. “Four weeks.”

“Lady’s Breath, they’re throwing children at us!”

“I’m no child! You are a puppet of the dread goddess! A heretic, what would you know about the ways of our order and our mettle?!” Malindria threw false bluster at the very accurate summation of her experience.

“Shall we go outside and count ears of the dead paladins within these walls? No?” Aurelia lashed out, petulantly, and kicked the paladin hard in the shinguard. “Now ask your question.”

Malindria winced, staggering with the force behind the blow. Whatever was wrong with this Bloody Saint was puzzling her. She took a moment to consider the wording of the question, then asked, “Where is Lilandria Caulithil, and is she alive?”

“That’s two questions, Malindria.”

“Ser Malindria Caulithill!”

“Mal.”

Malindria growled low but resolved to get her answer first before she let her anger get the better of her, “Pick one and answer, then!”

“If she is the person I think she is, then she’s alive and well.”

“And that’s it?”

Aurelia sheathed her own sword, keeping her opposite’s in her hand. Scratching at her jawline with the edge of the pommel, she confirmed, “That’s it. You got the answer I wished to give.”

“So, now what? You capture me, and I am held for torture and then sold off to some fat senator?”

“Again, I’m not doing any of that. The only torture I can offer is the shit excuse for wine we have. Plus, why would I try to get information out of a paladin greener than grass?”

“I am older than you by a fair sight, human!”

The Knight-Captain scoffed, “Please. I have been at war for eleven years, two before that a squire. How many have you spent as an adult?”

Malindria fidgeted, “Not as long as that.” Elves spent far more of their young life as adolescents, with a size and mentality very similar to that of a human ten- to twelve-year-old. Only after they reached the age of sixty-five did they progress into young adulthood. She paused as she seemed to work something out, “Wait, how old are you? You would have to be nearly thirty, but certainly don’t look it for a human.”

“I come from good stock,” Aurelia added the ‘from my mother’s side’ in the back of her head. Wanting to get to the end of the conversation and find the truth of things from her mother, she offered, “I have an offer for you.”

“What could a Bloody Saint offer me?”

“Do you want to see your mother again?”

“Of course!” Both of Malindria’s eyes went wide at the very thought of it.

“Good. Okay, well, we’re not getting you across the city in glittering mithril plate, and you’re hurt... I need you to take off that armor so I can tend your wounds, then stow it, and we can sneak you through the city.”

Malindria’s eyes narrowed again, “And why should I trust you, of all people, with any of that?”

“Well, how many Bloody Saints have you met that wouldn’t kill you on sight?” Aurelia tapped her own temple with a fingertip, “Think. I’d be just as ruined as you if found with you.”

As far as Malindria was concerned, it was too good to be true, especially with her father’s words still echoing in her skull. “Liar! I’ve been a fool! I-I-I should just avenge my mother and my father!”

“Oh, come on...”

Even disarmed, the paladin took a swing at Aurelia with a mailed fist. It grazed her jaw as the half-blood backpedaled from her sister’s blow. The next ones, she was ready for and blocked them easily enough, catching them with her vambraces and pauldrons.

“Malindria! Stop this!”

“Blackguard! Imperial bastards like you took my parents from me!” Over and over again, the paladin swung her fists.

Aurelia spun the paladin’s own sword about and slapped her hard in the breastplate with the flat of the blade. It sent Malindria staggering back against the wall with a grunt. The Knight-Captain tossed the weapon far away to the other side of the room, not wanting it to be too tempting to grab for. “Mal, I need you to take a moment and stop. This is a lot of noise...”

“Die, you whore of Calumnia!” screeched the paladin as she came at her sibling.

With a sigh, Aurelia balled her fist, cocked it, then put it into the side of her sister’s jaw hard enough to drop the paladin to the floor like a sack of tubers.

Chapter 6

The Truth

To dissemble is to show cowardice. Silence is the answer to the unworthy, not embarrassing oneself with falsehood. – Canon of the Son, Chapter 3, Verse 3

“Lady’s Breath, Aurelia...” Adelaide, known by her other daughter as Lilandria, breathed out as she saw her half-blood child. She had been let out of her cage, but had been led to the dining room by Andolius before he vacated.

Aurelia knew she did not cut a particularly fine figure. Her chest was nothing but a wrap of bandages, covering her bosom and left shoulder. There had definitely been a cracked rib under there. To avoid having her ears cut off yet again, she had escaped once Orthio had mentioned using healing magic, and would have to see how much time she was gifted to heal naturally before the next assault.

She wore a robe over her bandages and small clothes, but the purple bruising was everywhere, and there were stitches in her chin for the cut there. Exhaustion affected every part of her demeanor, and she was

making no effort to hide it on her face. Even her braid was wild with auburn trailers floating behind her as she moved.

“You stayed,” Aurelia pointed out the obvious.

“I said I would.”

Aurelia smiled sadly, “I’m glad to see not everything you ever told me was a lie.”

“I haven’t been lying to you! I thought by staying there would be some trust built...” Adelaide rattled the manacles, “So that maybe these could...”

“Stop, just stop,” Aurelia growled as her mother’s answer turned transactional, “What’s my mother’s name?”

“You know my name,” was the non-answer, a faltering smile behind it.

“Is it Lilandria, or is it Adelaide?”

The dumb stare told Aurelia everything she needed to know about the truth. “So, Lilandria it is. Caulithil as the family name, one of the masters of the Order of the Lady’s Guard, if I remember correctly.”

“I, um, I...” Her mother’s gaze narrowed, and her guarded nature returned, “How did you hear that name?”

Aurelia smiled sadly as she settled into the seat at the head of the dining table. Her father’s chair, now hers, “The assault went badly, as I’m sure you could already guess. For both sides. They took the Trade Gate down...”

Lilandria hissed between her teeth, but worry was already setting in her features.

“The Lady’s Guard was first into the breach behind the ram crew.”

“No, no, no, no...” Aurelia’s mother was up on her feet pacing back and forth, any effort to hide her emotions gone. Worry filled her gaze and her voice.

There was no inflection to Aurelia's tone. She just recounted facts, "We turned the parkam into a slaughter. Thousands dead, including most of the Lady's Guard. Both their foot and cavalry regiments."

"If they were dead, then how...?"

Aurelia leaned forward against the table, happy to throw some deceit by omission back at her mother, "There was one who somehow made it out of the butchery. I found her in a ruin. A young, barely knighted paladin. Kept screaming at me about her mother this, mother that. What was her name...?" Aurelia snapped her fingers, feigning ignorance.

Dropping back into her chair, Lilandria stared at her youngest daughter, "What did you do with her?"

"Malindria! That's right!" Aurelia beamed at her mother, "What should a Bloody Saint do with a paladin of the Lady's Guard?"

"You can't be so dense as to not have realized that she's..."

"My half-sister? Of course, I bloody well realized it!"

"Then where is my daughter!?" wailed Lilandria, sobbing into her hands as Aurelia's pantomime reached its crescendo.

Slapping her hand hard enough onto the table to startle her mother, Aurelia screamed at her, "RIGHT HERE IN FRONT OF YOU WHERE SHE'S ALWAYS BEEN! ABANDONED FOR YOUR REAL FUCKING FAMILY!" She stood seething for a moment before straightening and walking from the room.

"Wait! Relly! Aurelia..." Lilandria started to call after her half-blooded daughter when Aurelia reappeared, a struggling figure over one shoulder like a sack of potatoes. A hood had been put over the head of a feminine figure, and she had been thoroughly bound with rope, hand and foot.

"You have no idea what a pain in the ass it was to get her here." Aurelia commented as she dumped the form into her father's chair. Lifting the

hood, she revealed the bruised, but very alive face of Malindria Caulithil to her mother.

Lilandria surged forward and wrapped her arms around her daughter as best she could with the manacles in the way. They spoke rapidly to each other in Hilumani, mostly reassurances that each other was alright, as best Aurelia could tell. Her elvish tongue was passing at best, her Ghontish far stronger.

The half-blood cleared her throat. “Imperial or Ghontish tongue, please.”

“Relly, I’ve not seen her in a year...” her mother started.

“Or I can gag you both and end the visit.”

Lilandria gave a dark look to Aurelia, but relented, “Fine. Imperial tongue it is, Mal, you heard her.”

“Aye, mother. I’m sorry... father he is...” The paladin recounted how Rotheran had followed the giants into the breach of the Trade Gate first. That led to further explanation about how the giants had even been there in the first place.

“Rotheran...” Lilandria sighed, still not having wept a tear for her husband.

Malindria, eyes still damp from recounting her father’s fall, regarded her own mother curiously. Something seemed to click, and she asked, “Why is the Constantus acting like this? Why hasn’t she killed me or taken me as a slave?”

Aurelia snorted, “*The Constantus?* No, that was my father...”

Lilandria glanced between her two daughters, “What, you didn’t hear the earlier... you haven’t figured it out...?”

“Mother, what is it?” Malindria asked, even as Aurelia started to laugh.

“Mal, beloved, she’s your half-sister.”

Aurelia laughed so long and hard her ribs started to hurt again. Tears had to be wiped away from her eyes, and both of the elves were giving her a

dark look for it. She grinned broadly as she announced, “Congratulations, Malindria, now you get to know what I’ve always known about *our* mother – that she’s a goddess forsaken liar.”

“Y-y-y-you... w-w-with... you...” Malindria’s features turned beet red, all the way to the tips of her knife-shaped ears, and she stammered and staggered her way through attempting to speak.

Lilandria pinched the bridge of her nose, closing her eyes as the apparent migraine started to settle in. “Truly, Relly, this is the level of vindictiveness I would’ve associated with Julia.”

“Fuck you. I haven’t abandoned daughters twice over in my lifetime. You do not get to judge me, Lily. In fact, of anyone, I am the only one of the three that’s not been the villain in someone’s life.” Aurelia sneered, “Look, in my benevolence, I’ve even brought you two back together.”

“As your prisoners!” snarled Aurelia’s mother.

Malindria struggled and pulled at her bonds in vain, “Let us out! You’ve had your game, and if you are blood as is claimed, then you’ll release us!”

“You are welcome to try to get out of this city without getting yourselves killed or enslaved.” She cleared her throat, then loudly said the word, “Nalandria!”

With a clack, both of the manacles on Lily’s wrists undid themselves and then clattered to the ground in a pile of inert steel and chain. It left the older elf standing there blinking before looking at Aurelia, “That was the word?”

Aurelia nodded, “It was.”

Lilandria settled back down slowly into her seat, blinking away the tears that had not come at the news of the death of her husband. “Oh.”

“Those belonged to my father. Told me if my mother ever came back, she could stay with us and pretend to be a slave, so she’d be safe, and never have to leave again. That she could get out of them whenever she wanted because she’d know the word.” Aurelia approached against, letting one

hand rest on the dining room table as she stood between her sister and her mother, “It’s a name, I know that much. Tell me what it means.”

“It’s the name of a great hero in the legends... a champion of Her Son...” murmured Malindria.

“I’m a fool,” whispered Lilandria as she sniffled. She wiped at the tears, but they would not stop, and it was futile. “I should’ve known he’d be that sentimental.”

“Lily, tell me what it means,” insisted Aurelia.

“It’s your name. My name for you. We each picked a name. Aurelia, for your human half, and Nalandria, for your elven blood. I thought... thought that if their greatest hero, and an elf could have something... someone... we loved dearly between us, then maybe there could be peace and an end to the damn Toll.”

Aurelia’s gaze was still skeptical, “So, when you said you loved him...”

“I meant it, I swear to you. I, Lady Ilia forgive me, I fell in love, even with a husband at home. I wanted to spend his life with him, and...”

“Mother!” Mal struggled with the bonds that still held her, “How can you say that while married to father...!”

“Your father was an ass!” hissed out Lilandria. “The only good thing he gave our marriage was my children!”

Malindria stammered, “Y-you can’t...!”

Lilandria stood, rubbing at her wrists, “Did he tell you to hunt down and kill your sister at any point? That’s the type of man he was!”

“Wait... I... um...” Malindria’s eyes shot back and forth, then she looked to Aurelia before admitting, “Yes.”

Aurelia rubbed at her face with both hands, “Lovely. Nothing like being the target of further villainy by the Lady’s Guard.”

“Relly, I don’t think you understand. He knew you were my daughter...” Lily ground her teeth together for a moment, “And told my other daughter to kill you.”

Malindria paled, “Blessed Lady, that’s... Ser Aurelia, I’m so sorry, I never knew, I swear to Nalandiel above...”

Aurelia sighed, feeling exhausted by the drama. She began tugging at the ropes binding her sister, “I believe you. You’re too naïve to be anything other than what you appear to be. I am going to give you your parole, but you must stay in this house, or I can’t account for your safety.”

“How have you hidden your nature...?” Mal started to ask.

“She cuts her ears off, Mal,” Lily explained for her daughters.

“A habit started by my step-mother, but yes. It’s much more professionally done than a pair of shears, these days.” Aurelia finished removing the ropes that bound Mal in place.

Malindria scowled, “You mutilate yourself?” She pushed up out of the seat but quickly winced. Under the ropes she had been in a simple bondsman’s tunic, a sleeveless green affair that went to her knees. She clasped at the side that had been injured, finding the bandages that had been applied underneath. “You... you dressed my wound.”

“Blame Andy for both of those things if you don’t like it,” explained Aurelia.

“Who?”

“One of her two bondsman,” offered Lily as she took hold of one of Mal’s hands with both of hers.

Mal wrinkled her nose, “You own your own kind? That’s... disgusting.”

Aurelia rolled her eyes, “I don’t own them, not really. I own their bond, and they’ve had enough to pay it off forever; they don’t out of deference to me, because it’d be weird if they did. The moment they want to leave, they can. I even pay them a salary.” She began idly coiling up the ropes that had

been leftover in the chair, “So, I’m not so fool as to assume that one of the masters of the Lady’s Guard knew my parentage and didn’t have a problem with the fact that it was his wife who turned out to be my mother. Did he have anything to do with what those paladins did to my father?”

Lilandria glanced away for a moment, then back at Aurelia. Her voice was tired and resigned, “Now you know why I’ve been angry at him for quite some time.”

“My father was never walking out of that duel alive, was he?” Aurelia just kept coiling the rope as she asked the question.

Malindria gave her mother a wounded expression as Lilandria shook her head, “No. He ordered those paladins to kill him no matter how the fight with King Theobert went. Never mind that Theobert was an idiot who died in a heartbeat.”

Aurelia dumped the rope back into the seat in disgust, “Why am I not the least bit surprised?”

“It ripped my heart out, too!” pleaded Lilandria even as it was Malindria’s turn to drop into a chair while looking mortified.

“Truly? You left me behind before the siege even started, *mother...*” Aurelia turned the word into a bitter recrimination. “And he’s been dead for sixteen years. The new king is nearly old enough to take the throne in Tor Balad, it’s been so long. Then, barely a year ago, you sneak into my bedchambers, and I wake with a knife at my throat!”

Both women scowled at each other, anger and resentment boiling for how things had been for each of them. It was Malindria who broke the deadlock. “Mother. I think you need to tell us both the truth. Now.”

“Mal, my beloved jewel, I...” Lilandria started to plead.

Mal took a long, deliberate breath. She glanced towards her sister a moment, but found no reassurance as the half-blood only shrugged. Instead, she screwed her determination together on her own and

demanded once more, “We’re owed that, and you’re cornered now, so speak. Or by the end of this day, you may have no daughters at all.”

“Fine,” the elder woman sighed. “The truth, then...”

“This is a waste of coin, Julia. On top of that, I heavily dislike having slaves in my home.”

“Severan Constantus, you have wasted consul after consul buying out the bonds of all your servants and freeing them, and you have the temerity to lecture me about wasting money?” the young blonde scoffed cheerfully at her husband. “Come now, she’s even pretty enough your peers might offer you recompense to spend a night or two with her. She’ll be a lovely maid for me...”

Lilandria could hear the conversation already floating down the hallway. It had been little difficulty to ingratiate herself with the flighty canary that had been wed to the most influential of the members of Noctus’s council. First Knight of the Bloody Saints themselves, and she was in his home. It took every bit of willpower to keep the smirk off her face, as her handler had taken payment that would go straight towards more operations within the city of Noctus by the royal spies of the Kingdom of Galandir.

What the elven infiltrator had not expected was that Constantus’s staff were all freedmen. Good to find out now before she tried to turn any of them to her cause. Bonded half-bloods, those with a debt to the senate to work off for the crime of having been born with elven blood, were far easier to persuade than those who owed salary and livelihood to an employer. They saw themselves as citizens, desperate to marry a human and have children who had enough human blood in them that by law they would never hold a bond. Only those without any human blood in them at all – elves, dwarves, and the like – could be true slaves, bound until the day they died.

So, like the good little slave she pretended to be, Lilandria waited in her cell. It was nice, considering the expected accommodation. Clean, with a comfortable bed, a basin that was free of rust, even a mirror, and a small shrine to the Lady Ilia. A kind master was still a master, though, and there were precious few of those in the City of Chains. Not enough to redeem the Empire and what evil it propagated upon the world.

She had just finished adjusting her simple slave's tunic when the door opened, and her new masters appeared. Julia, still young and beautiful for a human, smiled like the cat who had caught a bird. "As I said, I think she will make a marvelous maid. Other houses will envy us."

It was always about status to the mayfly race of humanity. Every one needed to leave their mark on the world, Lilandria had long ago realized. It was one of the ways she and her handler had planned out the pitch to get Julia Constantus to "buy" her and bring her into the home of the couple.

As Lily curtsied, she saw him. She had been shown a sketched image and had seen a portrait, but nothing matched up with the real thing. Severan Constantus stepped into the frame of the door just as the elf was bending low, and her breath caught in her throat. Of course, she had expected him to be handsome. Everyone said he was, but he was beautiful and masculine in all the ways that elven men typically were not. His broad shoulders filled the doorframe, and he dwarfed his minuscule wife. His hair was a rich copper color running with deep browns at the roots, and his eyes were the brightest green she had ever seen outside a gemstone.

"M-m-my lord Constantus, a pleasure," stammered the elf, all her confidence having fled.

The heavyset human rolled his eyes, "Lady's Breath, don't call me that. Just Ser is enough. Stand straight, let me look at you."

Lilandria went stiff as a board, his rich baritone commanded her without effort. Somewhere in the back of her head, the more rational part screamed that she needed to stop acting like some swooning maiden.

Julia had been prattling on the entire time, but Lilandria had not paid any attention to the other woman at all. Instead, it was Severan who was heeding her. His ears perked, and he turned to his wife, “Repeat that?”

“I said, we can get the old brand out of the cellar and apply it to her shoulder...”

Lilandria had known that would be a possibility and was ready to have to deal with it when Severan growled at his spouse, “That’s not happening.”

Both Lily and Julia blinked up at the man in confusion. Lilandria because she had not expected otherwise, but Julia looked flustered, instead protesting, “But all the great houses do it! We-we can pack it with a poultice right after...”

“The only person who will ever see the hot end of a brand in my home is the first person foolish enough to try it on one of my servants. Are we clear, my beloved?” Severan’s tone brooked no argument.

Julia tittered nervously, “C-certainly, of course! I was just saying... it’s... it’s the fashion is all.”

“One I shall not be entertaining.” Turning back to Lily, he was smiling as if the topic had been completely forgotten. “Now, young maiden... I say that in jest, you’re likely older than I am... might I collect your name?”

“Adelaide Yarathil, ser.”

“How hopelessly romantic, mother,” Aurelia rolled her eyes at the recounting. “Straight out of some fable that you were besotted with him the first moment you saw him.”

“You knew him as well as I, Aurelia! How could someone not!?”

“Plus, you make it sound like he and Julia... I don’t know if got along is the right term, but every memory I have of them is them either ignoring each other or screaming at each other,” groused Aurelia.

Lilandria rubbed her fingertips over the old oak of the dining room table, “They treated each other far better when I first met them. Julia was even heavy with child at one point, then...”

“Calthus! Send to the Basilica for a cleric! Quickly!”

The old servant bolted from the room, and Severan returned to gripping tightly to Julia’s hand as she lay splayed out in their marriage bed. Servants ran in and out with fresh linens and warm water constantly as the small woman screamed through the labor pains. A half-blooded midwife had been paid to see to the birth of what should have been the Constantus’ first child.

Lily joined the parade of servants bringing whatever was needed to aid in the delivery. All that seemed to come out was blood, though. Even when the Bishop of Noctus himself rushed into the room, it was too late. What came out of Julia Constantus was a purple lump, barely shaped like a human child, and most of her insides. It had taken incredibly powerful magic to save her life, the type the Basilica usually reserved for its greatest heroes. It could not refuse a request from Severan Constantus, the man who had already won several border wars with Tor Ghontir.

She had left the couple in their marriage chambers to mourn along with the rest of the staff. Calthus kept them busy by sending them about the manor, putting up the black drapes of mourning. Her duties done and on the edge of exhaustion, Lilandria slipped back into her room and found the vial her handler had gifted her with. Within was the alchemical ungent that had turned Julia Constantus’s womb into a poisoned nest. Peeling up one of the floorboards, she hid the bottle away should she ever have need of it again.

It had been easy to slip a drop into the drinks she brought to the pregnant woman every day, adding only the faintest taste of almond. An elf might have detected it, but the blunt senses of a human failed Julia.

It was from there that the fights began. Severan and Julia battled back and forth across the house on the regular, almost always about her overuse of poppy weed. That had required no intervention on the spy's part, only Julia's own failings and inability to cope with what had happened. Severan wanted to adopt an heir, grant a young boy his name, and she refused. Keep trying with me, she demanded. It could not be her rotten womb, but an issue with his virility, she insisted.

The woman they knew as Adelaide knew better. It had been demanded by her handler and the High King that Severan Constantus have no heirs. She expected she would be told to kill him soon enough, now that his wife's belly was barren. It was not an order she thought she could comply with.

He treated her like a freedman. A kind master was still a master; she kept the mantra going in her head even as he made jokes with her, asked how she was doing, and seemed to actually care when she answered. When mundane problems arose, and they did, he addressed them with kindness and compassion. He even asked her if she had her eye on anyone, a suitor of some sort, and he would make sure it was allowed to happen.

Then he surprised her more than she ever thought he could have.

"Addy, I've been thinking about you quite a bit of late," his rich baritone rumbled as he found her dealing with the mess a drunk Julia had left behind over the floor of her room. Vomit and spittle and other bodily fluids.

"Ser, I am just a servant, you shouldn't think of me at all..." The worst part was, in the back of her mind, she liked hearing him say those words.

"I still hate that Julia bought you, and without my permission. There's no mechanism in Imperial law to free an elf, but..." He squatted down next to her and he was so close, she could feel the warmth of his skin and breath, "... we're not in Calexis. There is a path home for you here. Tomorrow, you

and I will ride to the border of the Treaty Lands. We'll hand you to the first Ghontish sentry we find, and they'll send you home."

That gave Lilandria pause. It would ruin her mission and force her to start all over, but she did not know how she could maintain her cover while being offered the dream of any enslaved elf – freedom. "I, um, ser, I couldn't... I..."

He stood and helped her to her feet, leaving the cleaning behind on the floor. Severan's smile was broad as he held one of Lilandria's hands gently in his own, "Come now. Surely you've dreamed of this, of going home..."

"You're a kind master, ser, the best I've ever had..."

"The only you've ever had, you mean."

Her cover story was that she had worked for several minor families, and she stammered out an attempt to correct him, "N-no, ser, I..."

"I knew you'd say no," The grip turned firm as he spun her about and shoved her onto the bed. "A spy in my household. Well done."

Lilandria stared up at Severan, aghast. All the little ways she could have been discovered raced through her head. "No, I'm loyal to you, Ser, I swear it to the Blessed Lady!"

"Loyal to me? Or loyal to the High King of Galandir? To the Ivory City?"

The anger that flashed across those handsome features wounded Lilandria to the quick. In each of his rows with his wife, all she had yearned to do was rush to him and comfort him. To be discovered, to be revealed, ruined any chance of what her heart hoped for.

"You! You! I... I would choose you! Tell me what to put in the reports and I will...!"

Severan stilled, staring down at her. "You really are. I could have sworn the spy in the Half-Blood Quarter was lying about you. Gods above, I've been a fool..."

He had not known. Severan had bluffed, and she had blinked, Lilandria realized, heart settling into the pit of her stomach. Her handler had been found, even given her up, but Severan had not wanted to believe until she confirmed it. She could see the pain on his face. He thought he had been good to her, and by Imperial standards, he had.

“No, no, please, no...” she rose up on the bed and reached out, cupping his cheeks, “Don’t discard me. Please.”

“You’re a spy. Truly.” He gripped her wrists. He did not squeeze, but his grip was steel, pulling her hands away from his face.

“I’ll be your spy. Tell me what to write, I will, just keep me. Make me yours.”

One russet eyebrow raised, “Define that, Adelaide.”

“I’ll give you the child that your wife can’t. I’ll give you the heir that your fellow bride refuses to let you adopt.” She threw herself thoroughly into her last gambit, letting her voice turn low and sultry, letting her elven beauty work for her.

One hand shifted from her wrist to around her neck, again he held but did not throttle as his gesture threatened, “You would be the ruin of me.”

“Let me be your salvation, Severan.” She addressed him as an equal for the first time, using his given name. His hand around her throat and her wrist thrilled her. If that was how she ended, she would be content, she thought. “Enough of our people killing each other like Calumnia-damned fools. Show them that tempered together, we produce sterner stuff than the weaklings like Theonar and the First Consul and their constant yearning to one-up each other.”

“A half-blood cannot inherit anything but coin and land,” warned Severan. “I would need to change the very nature of this goddess-forsaken city.”

“You are Severan Constantus, and you can make the world tremble...” Lilandria pushed forward into the hand around her wrist, letting its steel choke her just a little to allow her to nuzzle against his throat. A kiss, a

quick lick of her tongue, and then a languid smile came from her as she got to do what she had dreamed of since that first moment. "... but you can start with me, if you want."

He was upon her then, there in his marriage bed. Stripped of all pretense of her false identity, she was laid bare before him and spread wide. Lily let him inside gladly, and when it was done, she had never felt more content. Severan had been inside every part of her, and she wanted it to happen again and again.

She was still basking atop the sheets of the bed while Severan cleaned himself at the water basin and mirror. Lily could not help but catch the smile he cast at her through the reflection, and she felt like a young maiden again, mooning over handsome boys. The husband at home, long forgotten, did not even enter her own mind.

It was so thoroughly expected that Julia would ruin it. The blonde burst into the room, hair frazzled and eyes bloodshot from too much poppy weed to chase away the pain of the rot in her belly. She stood like a deer startled by the noise of some predator, regarding her spouse and their maid and their shared nakedness.

Lilandria made no effort to protect her modesty. Instead, she turned fully towards Julia on the bed, letting her see exactly what had just replaced her. A slow, cruel smile worked its way over her lips as she regarded the little canary.

Severan continued his washing, gaze leveled squarely at his wife, "Julia, I think it best you leave. I'll speak to you in the study."

With that, Julia fled, the sobbing audible throughout the house.

"You murdered a child in the womb!" Malindria stood in the old servant's room that had once belonged to her mother. There, below the floorboard,

they had found the potion used to kill Julia Constantus's child, desiccated from years of neglect. It, at least, would never harm another.

"You asked for the truth of it, and you wonder why I softened it for you. The High King demanded it, and I served. That's a lie, actually." She then corrected herself, "I did it to make room for myself, so that there'd be nothing that tied him to that fetid cow. The High King's command just made the decision easier." Lily shrugged, but regarded Aurelia, not her elven daughter.

Aurelia held the bottle of unction in her hand, spinning it this way and that as she inspected it. Fingerprints cut through the years of dust and grime over the blue glass. "I would likely not even be, or maybe be someone else, if this had not happened. Or I may even have had another sibling."

"Only the goddess can truly know," murmured Lilandria. "I do not feel sorrow. Who would want to be the child of that woman?"

Aurelia grit her teeth in anger before shooting a glare at her mother, "Yes, truly, who would want to be raised by that bitch, eh? How much of what she became was because you ripped her womb out, Lily?"

"Do not shed crocodile tears for her, Aurelia," snarled Lilandria back at her youngest daughter, "That monster was always under the surface; it just took adversity to cut its chains and set it free."

"Oh, fuck her, but you're a murderer and a liar." Aurelia jabbed a finger into her mother's chest hard enough to force the other woman back.

"Yes," she admitted softly, "I am."

"Everything I chose to do, chose to be... it was based on you and father being nothing but LIARS!" Malindria screamed at her mother, rage billowing forth. She battered Lilandria with her fists, slamming them into her mother's chest over and over again only to be pulled away by Aurelia, grappling her thrashing sister and separating them.

“Shhh,” whispered Aurelia into her sibling’s ear. “Shh. It’s okay, you’re not alone in this. Shh.” The half-blood, larger of frame and shoulder than Malindria, was able to eventually bear her sister down onto the old slave’s bed and get her settled onto its straw mattress.

Lilandria rubbed at her chest where she had been struck, but remained quiet as the scene played out and Aurelia took control. She watched her youngest elven child be rocked back to serenity by the half-blood she had once abandoned. Wiping at tears welling in her eyes, she admitted, “You’re good at this.”

A dark look came from Aurelia in response, “Good at what?” Her tone was apprehensive, expecting some venom to come from her mother.

“Being kind. It’s like him. He was a far, far better father and man than Rotheran, that I’ll admit.” Lilandria sighed and looked up to the heavens as she admitted, “Goddess above, I prayed so hard to wish he’d been born an elf instead of a human. I would’ve quit with Rotheran immediately and spent my life with him.”

Arms still wrapped around her sibling, Aurelia asked, “Well, why didn’t you? It’s time you answer for that. Why did you leave me, then leave my sister in turn?”

“You won’t like the answer,” Lily warned her daughter.

Aurelia glowered even as Malindria curled into a ball and sobbed, “I haven’t liked anything you’ve said. If you ever want to repair whatever in the goddess’s name this relationship is, you’ll be honest.”

“I will, but let’s give your sister time to recover. You both need to recuperate, physically and mentally, I suspect.” It was the first time Aurelia could detect actual care in her mother’s tone.

“Alright, then. I had Andy and Daph get the biggest guest room cleaned up. You two can figure out your sleeping arrangements there.”

Chapter 7

The First Consul's Decree

You are no more a Republic than Ilium is the Celestial City! You mask a tyranny in the trappings of democracy! – King Aethelwin Aelbert of the Ghont, refusing to swear allegiance to the Empire, 174 AC

Aurelia was still sore. Every movement made her feel like she was creaking as she walked along the wall and surveyed what was left of the Trade Gate and its parkam. The rain was not helping in the slightest, nor was dismissing Orthio when he tried even the simplest of palliative spells. Having to be in armor virtually every moment when out and about only made it worse.

The rumors of a truce to recover the bodies had been true. It had taken several days to clear the mess out of the parkam, and that had required shovels and carts pulled by donkeys by the end of it. Slag from molten armor and melted basalt had made an eerie pearlescent kaleidoscope all along the edges of the walls of the outer courtyard. As the truce looked ready to end, the rain had started.

Before the war, there had been a virtual second city outside the walls of Noctus. Roads led to townships and small defensive citadels throughout the area of Medraut under Imperial administration. Known as the Treaty Lands, it was its own little nation with Noctus as its capital, governed by a Praetor sent from Ilium. Once the city had been sieged, everything from the base of the walls down to the bridge at Consul's Knot had been ripped up and either turned into a weapon, a projectile, or yet more defensive palisade. The bridge had only been spared due to being needed by the Coalition to cross the chasm that nearly split the Noctan peninsula from the mainland.

Nothing held the topsoil together anymore, transforming the entirety of the battlefield between city and siege line into a morass. It was the type of mud and muck that would suck your boot off if you hit too deep of a patch. Siege engines listed to one side, beasts of burden floundered, and everyone was miserable.

The only good thing about being in Noctus instead of the siege camp was that there were many more roofs to hide under, and the foundations ran deep enough that the ground remained firm. As Aurelia watched from beneath her white hood, protected from the rainwater, she saw most of the Coalition gathered in their tents or under the eaves of their siege equipment. Once the rain stopped, Aurelia expected them to begin burning whatever corpses hadn't already been reduced to ash by Ilian Fire.

Imperial mages had been busy during the rain, reshaping the remains of the Trade Gate's gatehouse into a solid wall over where the gate had once been. It was as thick as the rest of the wall, and no masonry was used to make it, but a singular piece. There would be no ramming it down. The other two gates, with their intact gatehouses, had repelled the giantish ram crews.

“Mum,” it was Vespasian who approached her, helm tucked under one arm and his own hood up to ward off the elements. “Think that was it, or do you think there’s more to this affair?”

“They’ll come again. Too much blood spent not to see it through to the end, I think.” She rolled her shoulder and winced at the crackling sound she heard from it.

“Proper bombardment this time?”

The Knight-Captain nodded, “We beat the overconfidence out of them. They’ll do it proper this time. In fact, if I were them...” she turned and looked westward along the wall. “Right there.”

“That’s where your father died, where the old breach was, isn’t it?”

Aurelia slowly nodded, “Aye. It was repaired quickly with magic, and they didn’t have every piece like they did with the gate here, as it’d been scattered or vaporized in the blast from underneath. It’s the weak spot in the walls.”

“Trebuchet and onager, given time, could topple it,” agreed Vespasian.

“Re-open the breach. Attack along the entire wall while sending whatever giants remain in. The Shadow Fleet took a black eye fighting both navies at once, which could be another weak point. Land marines on the docks...”

“With the casualties we took...”

“They suffered, too, Vespy, but yes.” Aurelia scowled out at the far away Coalition troops. “The Order is down by a quarter, the Nineteenth is in a similar position, and the Blackshields even worse off. Think we killed twenty-five thousand of them to keep the ratios the same?”

“To be honest, I don’t know how to count what they had to mop out of the Trade Gate.”

Aurelia snorted at the grim humor and toothy grin that Vespasian offered. It reminded her why she treasured him as her second. Patting his breastplate affectionately, “Tell me you had a reason to come find me while I was brooding.”

“Aye. Runner from the Black Fortress. All senior captains, which I mightn’t remind the mum she’s getting old, so counts as one, and the First Knight have been summoned.”

“Summoned? I can’t imagine the Legate *summoning* the First Knight, the two are friends.”

“Confused me, too, mum, but you’re the brains of this outfit, so I came to find ye.”

Aurelia hmmed softly under her breath, then told her second, “Let us not be tardy, then.”

At least the meeting room was warm and dry. Even better, the wine being served to all the senior military commanders of Noctus was good, the best that Aurelia had tasted in years. She idly pondered if she could steal a bottle because thinking about her home life at that moment inspired the desire to drink heavily.

The room was near the top level of the Black Fortress. It was the old city council’s chamber, back when Noctus had a functioning civilian government. A vast, semi-circular table filled much of the room. Built for a council that no longer sat, it could handle two dozen dignitaries with ease. Walls and columns still made of the brownish black of basalt hemmed it in, with the only color being the colors of regiments and companies taken from the Coalition, either the unit or its dignity destroyed when the unit died on the walls over the decades, and their banners now hung as trophies in the heart of their enemy’s citadel. Blood, reduced to a dull mahogany color, still stained a handful.

Behind the head of the table stood the part of the room Aurelia hated most. Her father had watched every proceeding since shortly after his death. Ten feet tall, if an inch, a statue engraved from the basalt of Mount Noct stood in his full armored regalia. A near-perfect replica of Defiance was clutched

in his hand, held high above the room. What Aurelia despised most about the carving was his face. Its features were his, drawn from one of his portraits, but they were stern and impassive. No warmth, love, or kindness that she remembered remained, only the artifice that other men worshipped. Long ago, the half-blood had decided this was not her father, just some idol cast in his image.

What piqued Aurelia's curiosity was that while Claudius Rex was in attendance, he was not in his usual spot at the head of the table. That chair, reserved for the Proconsul when in residence, or the Praetor when running day-to-day business, sat empty for the first time since Aurelia had ever been in the room during a meeting.

Noctus had been under martial law for two and a half decades, and the Senate had stopped bothering to appoint a Praetor for the city, or a governor, known as a Proconsul, for the region. Whomever the Legate Militant of the 19th was filled the role, and that man was Claudius Rex, a veteran and a Noctan native.

At first, the meeting was boring. Figures and reports of casualties and estimated enemy losses filled the meeting. Some of the senior captains of the Order were fidgeting. Aurelia knew them well enough to know that none of them gave the slightest hint of care about this. They were blunt instruments best pointed at a nail to act as its hammer. Steno, the captain of the First Cohort, the elite of the elite, was the worst. He had his visor down on his helm, and she knew he was dozing. The Knight-Captain had to respect his skill with a blade, but despised his arrogance.

Her own father had been Captain of the First before being named First Knight. It was seen as the successor, and only rarely was that cohort's officer not named when a First Knight retired or fell in combat. Letting Steno drift out of her thoughts, Aurelia went back to paying more exacting attention to the reports. She used parchment and a bit of graphite to work out the numbers of how many the defenders had lost versus how many the Coalition had probably lost.

Aurelia did not like how the numbers were adding up. While the Coalition had lost some of its most elite, many giants and much of the Lady's Guard, it still had raw numbers to toss at Noctus. Without reinforcement, it was a matter of when, not if, the Imperials ran out of defenders. It did not matter if the Coalition was bled white doing so, they only had to take the city, and that was the end of it. The Empire would be thrown off the continent, and the war was over for all intents and purposes.

"I'm sure you've all come to the same conclusion I have," Claudius Rex announced loudly to the assembled officers and commanders. "We can't assume that the High King will make the same fool mistake and send all his troops into a funnel, again. Instead, we have to be prepared for a full bombardment, a breach, and then a giant-led assault."

Murmurs of assent came from around the table. After twenty-five years of siegecraft, each of the command positions within Noctus had become very meritocratic. None of the men were fools, even if the Blackshields of the city guard and militia were still famed for nicking a coin or two in bribes wherever they could.

It was then she noticed that Antonius had been hanging behind the Legate most of the meeting. The look on his face was one of deep resignation instead of the cocky surety she had grown familiar with from him. It worried Aurelia, and she leaned forward to hear what the Legate was about to say.

"So, to that end, I have news," the Legate pulled a scroll free from his belt and unfurled it. Reading from it, he quoted, "By order of the Senate of Ilium, the First Consul declares the following – The war between the so-called Coalition of Medraut and our beloved Republic of Ilium has gone on long enough. The People, through their representatives in the Senate, have commanded Lady Ilia's servants to bring about a final conclusion to this war that has drained so many resources and lives for so long. To effect this command, the following is so ordered by my hand..."

Aurelia's full attention had been captured. The Senate had always been willing to line the pockets of its most ardent supporters, the merchant class,

by buying all the material needed for war. An endless war and an infinite hunger for lives and coin had fueled the forges of the capital. Even Foundry Street in Noctus had transformed from the manufacture of chains and shackles to plate and blade.

Had the treasury of the largest empire in the known world finally run empty? She discovered her answer as the Legate continued reading.

“Firstly, the commanders of Noctus are to take whatever steps are necessary to end this war. It is hereby ordered to take whatever initiative is needed to break the siege and then, once the campaign season begins, march upon the Ivory City and sack it.

“Secondly, Noctus is to be reinforced. The Armada is ordered assembled and shall sail directly to Noctus and break the blockade, and is ordered to prosecute the destruction of any Coalition naval forces with extreme prejudice.

“Thirdly, the Second Legion is ordered to Noctus immediately, with the Third through Eighth to assemble upon the Campus Ilium for preparation to sail as soon as the blockade has been eliminated.”

About to read another point, the First Knight of the Order stood. “You can’t be serious, Legate! The Second has a reputation...”

“A WELL EARNED ONE!” boomed a voice from the far edge of the room. With that announcement, in sauntered a heavyset older woman, waiting in the eaves for the perfect time to be dramatic. She wore the gold breastplate and red trim of the Second Legion’s Legate Militant. She kept a red-bristled helm tucked neatly under one arm. Her face was flat from an oft-broken nose, and a patch with the Lady Ilia’s emblem covered one eye, a scar slashing across her face from underneath it. Tucked into her belt was her rod of office, but it was not red, like the colors of her legion, like the black one Claudius Rex carried for the 19th, but the white of a Proconsul.

“Fourthly, and finally,” continued Claudius Rex through the interruption. As he spoke, the new arrival grinned toothily at the First Knight, even as he

glared daggers across the room at her. “the Legate Militant of the Second, Licinia Pullo Calexanus, shall be named Proconsul for all Medraut. She shall be empowered to fulfill any of these directives through all means necessary, and all present commands of Noctus shall report directly to her. Glory to the Senate and People of Ilium. Blessed be the Lady Ilia and Her son. Thus it is so ordered, signed, First Consul Hieronymus Tertullus.”

With the order reading complete, Claudius Rex rolled the scroll case across the table, letting it unfurl for all to see. There on the parchment was the First Consul’s scrawled name and his seal. It was real, and it had come directly from the seat of Empire.

Silence reigned as the various command staff came to grips with the new reality. Pullo let that go on for a moment before dropping her rod of office loudly on the table and settling into the Proconsul’s seat. “Get the mourning over with and move on. I don’t care if you don’t like me, and I know a fair few of you probably don’t. There’s a war to win.

“That said, I would like to congratulate you all on that remarkable thing of beauty you all did at your central gate. Phenomenal work, that bit of massacre. All that talk of numbers and figures, you were right to be worried, but we’re here now. The entire Second slipped in under the blockade with what was left of your Shadow Fleet.”

A full legion, even one with a reputation, changed a lot of the math. At complete strength, it would be five thousand men and women under arms. If it came with auxilia such as spearmen or archers, even more.

“So, it’s as simple as this,” Pullo continued, leaning back in her seat casually, “The Second will help you hold the fort for the time it takes the full Armada to assemble and sail. Then, when six overstrength legions land, and we sweep aside this rabble...” Her smile turned vicious, “... then lads and lasses, we march for Galandir and the Ivory City. We will pull that petulant child Theonar off his throne and skullfuck every elf from here to there. Every man, woman, and child in that nation will be dragged back to Calexis in the chains they deserve.”

Pullo leaned forward again, elbows braced on the table, “Now, let’s hear some ideas on how we make this a reality.”

Aurelia looked up at her father’s statue. It remained as immutable and false as she always remembered. Meeting her father’s gaze had always brought a smile to his handsome features. The portrait she favored in her home still had some of that, that generous smile, the light captured in his eyes. There was no comfort to be found in this basalt idol, so she relied on what the figures and facts indicated would work best. A numbers game, as war often devolved into, to try to spook the Coalition and make them blink.

As the various commanders and officers around the table began to gabble and suggest between themselves, it was Aurelia who stood and announced, “Mum, actually, I think I have an idea of both how their next assault will come about and what to do about it.”

Pullo cocked her head regarding the half-blood knight. “You’ll forgive me for not knowing you by sight, Ser...?”

“Ser Aurelia Constantus Noctanus, mum, Captain of the Third Cohort.”

The Proconsul hmphed softly, not impressed by the name, even as she sat within the great man’s shadow. “Fine, let’s hear it.”

Aurelia was talking to the First Knight in the corridor when Antonius found her. To his credit, the Tribune did not interrupt, only waited patiently until the First Knight bid his goodbyes and walked away.

“You’re going to tell me I’m as cruel as her,” Aurelia confronted him before he could start.

“The thought had crossed my mind, but you didn’t leave thirty miles of road with slaves crucified every fifty paces like she did, so I’ve not quite reached that conclusion.”

Aurelia wrinkled her nose, more troubled than ever by the notion, “Truly?”

“Aye. Even back home, it was a scandal, but she suppressed a rebellion, so she got to have her triumph right down the Via Iliia.”

A parade, over putting down a slave rebellion, not some great enemy of the Empire that was defeated. It galled and disgusted Aurelia. She barely thought defeating the Coalition would merit such a thing, but slaves were no enemy, just people who needed to be treated better to maintain order by Imperial standards. Even the Basilica taught that cruelty to the bonded and enslaved would be met with harsh judgment by Nalandiel before being taken to the Celestial City or to the Hells in the afterlife, as they should be allowed a chance to peacefully work off their worldly penance to allow them to be redeemed.

Antony sighed, interrupting Aurelia’s growing indignation, “But no, I did not come to reprimand you. I... just... I just wanted to say I’m happy to see you up and about after that fight at the Trade Gate. If I had prosecuted that defense better, it never would’ve come to that...”

“Antony, that was not your fault...”

“Mine was the only gate that opened!”

Aurelia rolled her eyes, “Don’t be a prideful fool. That gatehouse was a handicap no one could’ve overcome against giants. You fought bravely and honorably, that’s all that can be expected.” She slapped his breastplate hard enough that he staggered back a step, “Don’t act like an idiot to me like that again. I do not appreciate that quality in a man, especially not from you.”

The cocky grin snuck back onto his features, “What qualities do you like?”

“Now who’s getting overly bold?” She raised a brow at him with that question.

“Well, I’d ask if I am, but I have a feeling that if I tried to be anything other than precisely what I am, that would be what actually angered you.”

“You’re correct with that, the last thing I have time for is someone pretending to be someone they’re not.” Aurelia realized the irony of her statement just a moment after saying it. Committed to the bit, she decided to power on.

He paced around her, carefully regarding her like he was inspecting one of his own men, “Here’s my guess: while your father’s name is revered even back home, the people I talk to around this city treat him like he should be sainted. Some of that extends a little too heavily to you for your taste, and you *like* someone who treats you like a person and not something to be held on a pedestal.”

“I have the men and women of my cohort,” the Knight-Captain returned, though uncomfortable at just how close to the mark he was. She had no friends outside of her direct subordinates, both at home and in the Order. It was just easier to hide away those parts of herself she could never let be seen if she did not let anyone in.

“I would say that is a poor counter to my supposition.” He smiled broadly as he ceased his pacing and stood before her.

“So, what is it you want, Antony?” She folded her arms over her chest, his accuracy causing the familiarity to become annoying once more.

Pulling a gauntlet off, he revealed that there were several plainly worked rings on the fingers of his left hand. He pulled one off his ring finger and offered it to Aurelia. She could see the engraving of a lyre worked into the roughly crafted gold, its luster dim to show the lack of purity in its craftsmanship. “My token.”

Aurelia had to stifle a laugh, “Seriously? Is this some ham-handed attempt at romance?”

“Let it be what you want it to be. All I am asking is that you find me and return it after the next battle. So that I know you lived, so that I get to see you again. Laugh at me then, tell me you never want to talk to me again if

you so choose, I would just consider it an honor to speak with you after this."

She regarded the simple ring and the equally simple man who held it aloft. Not simple in the manner of the foolish, but one without the weight of a family name or a house behind him. The Knight-Captain had to admit he did intrigue her and was not hard to look at. Femininity had been discarded by her long ago, an artifact that belonged to Julia and her dresses, coifed hair, and perfumes. She found refuge in her father's lifestyle, divorcing herself from anything that reminded her of her stepmother.

Aurelia had never bothered with suitors. That was something that came from Julia's world, and everything that reminded her of that woman, aside from a portrait kept behind a drape, had been discarded. Jewelry and silks had been sold, and all the money given to orphans and widows of the Order. The only lovers she had ever taken in her life were Daphne and Andolius. For a long while, she had assumed she would go without due to her nature.

Impulsively, she snatched the ring away from him and deposited it into a pouch on her belt. "I want an answer to a question in return."

"I am an unfurled scroll to you, my lady."

"Do not use that form of address, Antony. That was my mother, whom I am not." She referred to Julia as her mother, an old habit that she loathed after each instance of it.

"Apologies, Aurelia." He grinned, becoming even more familiar with his address.

She did not correct him, as she had started down that path by referring to him by his diminutive. "Accepted. More seriously, what has made the Senate so desperate that they finally committed the resources not just to hold the city versus giants, but engage in a war of conquest?"

He sighed, sobering at the subject matter. "Bluntly? The Empire is nearly bankrupt, as I am certain the Coalition is, too. This war has been a vortex

of funding, and the constant rebellions and uprisings are the warning sign of it. Slaves being whipped for every last copper coin, allied tribes being taxed until they hang their taxmen, and the legions have to be sent in... It's getting worse, not better. When I was with the Third, the last campaign season we were in the eastern foothills alone, instead of with three or four other legions as doctrine dictates, because everyone else was busy."

"Lady's Breath..."

"Pullo made her name putting down those rebellions. It says something there've been enough that one could be made Proconsul on the back of it." He sighed, "Now imagine how much money the Empire could reap in slave sales of elven families and the plunder of the most ancient riches on the continent out of the Ivory City. There are things from the empires of old still on display in those temples worth more than half this city."

Aurelia considered that for a moment and realized then that she had no stomach for marching into Galandir, not with an elven family sitting in her very home. "Then think of my plan as a bit of mercy through ruthlessness. We force them to realize that this siege is over and they must retreat. Only my father ever took any of the border fortresses in living memory; they're citadels since how badly the Twins fared in the Ghontish Wars back in the day. An intelligent general would retreat, staff the border, and maybe we can finally have a negotiated peace. If I must be a monster to make it so, then so I must be."

"That's assuming both sides want peace. I can't see Pullo settling for anything other than complete capitulation, if you want to know what a true monster looks like."

"It won't be up to just her," reminded Aurelia, "The Senate can always yank her leash, or the First Consul himself. If the Empire's treasury is near empty, there's no way they can maintain a deployment of this size for long..."

Antony made an annoyed noise, “True enough. Listen, on further thought, this has been a move in the making for months now. I’m not the only veteran, I’m sure, who was offered extra incentive to retain their commission. The First Consul needed an excuse to step outside the status quo, and after the giants intervened, he had it.”

Tapping her foot for a moment, Aurelia finally huffed, then admitted, “I loathe politics. Too much thinking, too little simply acting.”

Her answer was a sympathetic smile, “Let’s move on from talking about the subject, then.”

“Yes, let’s.” Aurelia produced her dagger and then quickly removed a lock of her own hair. She proffered it to the Tribune, “Let it not be said we do not remain on equal footing.”

“Oh, a lock of your hair? Now who is being romantic...?”

As he reached for it, she snatched it away, “As I said, I merely wish for us to be on even ground. If you would rather mock instead of take it...”

“No, no, it’s not that... I just thought my attention was more one-sided than it appeared. I would be honored, Ser Aurelia Constantus Noctanus.”

At the use of her full name, she extended the lock once more. He took it quickly, then produced twine from a pouch to wrap about it and keep it together. “I’ll keep it as steadfast as Iolias was to his beloved. The good version, not the retelling.”

A smile breached her mask, broad and beautiful, and Aurelia had to admit, “I love the stories of Iolias. My father read those to me all the time.” Her emerald eyes sparkled as she added, “And the good version only, my father insisted.”

“As did mine. My brother and I would take turns pretending to be the Cyclops and having his eye put out. It was a marvelous game until I stuck him in the eye once. Thankfully, like the idiot I am, I did that wrong, and he kept the eye.” He made a face, the delivery entirely unserious.

Aurelia found herself halfway through making the sound when she stifled the giggle that had come out of her. She had done the same, minus actually gouging an eye, with the children of the half-blooded servants when she was younger. It reminded her, momentarily, of a time when happiness was a concept that existed in her life. Clearing her throat, she adjusted the mask of the Knight-Captain back into place and added unneeded grit to her tone, “Glad to hear your brother fared it well.”

His eyes gleamed as he watched her, and she knew she had been seen through, even if for only a moment. “There you are, Relly. So good to meet you.”

Her cheeks burned at the implication and familiarity, but she was determined to salvage some of her dignity, “So it seems, but we shouldn’t dwell on childhood too much. War to win and all, right?”

“You are absolutely correct.” He pushed her lock of hair away into the pouch the twine had come from. “It’ll be up to the engineers for now, but as soon as the rain stops and the ground dries, it’ll be back to us. Good day to you, Ser Aurelia, may the Lady bless you and yours.”

“You as well, Ser Tribune.” Her gaze lingered as he strode away, chiding herself in the back of her mind the entire time, yet unable to look away from him.

Malindria had retreated to the study that was filled from one end to the other with scrolls and books. At least that had been someplace she could get away from her mother’s constant need to hover and ensure that she was well. Even as she paged through one of the volumes of Imperial poetry, she muttered darkly to herself in her native Hilumani.

“You know I love you, Mal. I just am so happy to see you safe, Mal. I do mourn your father in my own way, Mal...” She added an uptilt to her voice

to match the tone that Lilandria always affected when trying to seem more matronly.

Mal shoved the tome away from her, “Augh, why are Imperial poets universally awful!”

She was roused out of her doldrums by a rapping on the doorframe. There stood the servant she had met, known as Andolius, in a simple tunic, sandals, and a bondsman’s belt with its many pouches, all he wore.

“Still wanting to suffer in solitude,” he asked in the Imperial tongue, “Or do you feel up to doing something to keep your hands and mind busy?”

Mal sighed and stood from the desk that had once belonged to Severan Constantus. It was not the manner she had thought she would ever get to see it, but it was as beautifully carved as she suspected a hero’s furniture would be. “What is it, bondsman?”

“Lady’s Breath, Andolius or Andy, please.” He motioned, “My wife is with your mother in the bath, so you can help me make the soup for the evening. Idle hands are Calumnia’s playground and all that.”

Mal scowled at the half-blood. “You shouldn’t say her name.”

He scoffed, “Please. She only has as much power as you let her have, and I refuse to fear that nasty old gash.”

The paladin grunted, but acceded to the point. She moved to follow and ask, “So … Daphne was it?… she drew my mother a bath?”

“She did that, yes, and will be seeing to her in the bath.”

Mal pulled up short, regarding her companion curiously, “Why?”

Andy shrugged, “Your mother was in a cage for a while, and the two have always gotten along well. Maybe she was lonely since her daughter ran off, and just wants to talk? Maybe they want to have some fun together? I don’t care, either way.”

Malindria blanched at the thought of it, “But… you’re her spouse!”

“Daph can have fun as she pleases as long as she comes home to me every night. We were trained to be whores, originally, so this is nothing for us. It’s the same as the time we both have spent with Relly.”

Disgust roiled within the paladin’s core, “She sleeps with you? Both of you?”

“Yes and yes,” He took her by the elbow and drug her forward gently and into the kitchen before releasing her. “Listen, before you toss your holier than thou at me, as I can see that look on your face, try asking me before making assumptions.”

Mal crossed her arms over her chest grumpily for how she was being treated, “Fine. Mind explaining it to me in a way that makes sense?”

“Better, try a please next time, but I’ll allow it.”

“You don’t act like how I’d expect someone in bondage to act at all!” she protested, without even giving him a chance to explain as she had asked.

“Thank you!” He grinned, then pointed, “Fetch me two soup bones and a bay leaf out of that cabinet.” There was silence as he counted out a handful of potatoes and carrots, and Malindria returned with what was needed for the broth.

“Well?” she asked him as she set the ingredients on the cutting board in front of the half-blood.

“Oh, right.” He shrugged. “Relly is our dear friend, and she’s got her own demons she battles, but we try our best to put some warmth and love back in her life. Up until the point that we invited her, not the other way ‘round, she spent every single night I had known her alone, too afraid a suitor would figure out the truth of her.”

Malindria frowned, but not in disapproval. “That sounds dreadfully lonely.”

“So, I talked it over with Daphne, and she agreed. We invited her to spend a night with us. It took a few offers before she accepted, and that first night, all she wanted to do was be held. A few nights of that, well... Daphne’s

quite persistent when she wants to be. It turned out that was her first night with *anyone*. She loved herself so little, she had refused to let anyone else love her.” He shoved the root vegetables over to Malindria, “Cut these.”

It took Malindria a moment to find a knife, only to realize they had been in plain view. Sheepishly, she started to dice. “She should just come back to Galandir with mother and I once this is all done. We could introduce her to so many people, let her make friends and maybe even find true romance...” Her tone turned wistful as she recounted the storybook ideas that still floated in her head.

Andolius snorted, “As if she’d ever leave.”

“But Noctus is... is...” Mal flailed for a word, then just went with what she felt in her gut, “... a slaver infested shithole!”

A laugh was the immediate response, but Andy smiled broadly after, “Oh, I don’t actually plan to argue that point. It’s her home, Malindria. She was born here, grew up here, her father died defending it. Don’t you want to go back to wherever it is you’re from, regardless of its faults and flaws?”

Malindria scowled and concentrated, trying to recall any flaws of her own home. Childhood had been sheltered, on an estate near a Marulami tribal village, which is how she had met Kellintil. They had grown up together, chased each other around swimming holes, and across open fields as adolescents. It had been utterly natural to begin courting the other woman as they grew into adulthood. She answered honestly, “My memories of home are too swamped with the love of my life that I met there. I was too young and mired in the lies of my mother and father to be able to speak to them rationally.”

Andolius smiled, “Well, there is the acclaimed truthfulness of a paladin. There’s nothing wrong with that, it just means your view is tinted. If you can admit to it, that’s a sight better than most folks. Just like mine is about Noctus, and getting one of the kindest of all bond owners. Daph and I still

pray to the Lady to birth the new gods every day, still, like every other half-blood.”

That forced a sniff from the paladin, “Isn’t that a heresy from the half-bloods of the Ribbon? How do you even know of it?”

“There’s plenty of half-blood families that started off in the lands between Tor Ghontir and Galandir. Stolen in raids, handed over as part of the Toll, and on and on. I’d be more surprised if we hadn’t heard of the New Canon.” He leaned forward, conspiratorially, “We have a copy. If you want to read it.”

Mal almost looked offended at the implication, “Please tell me that my sister...”

“... doesn’t believe a lick of it, trust me. We’ve certainly tried, but she does seem to like the hopeful message in it.”

“So, not only does she keep bonds on her own kind, but also a pair of heretics under her roof.”

Andolius gave the elf a deadpan look, “Isn’t your sister, by the definition of the Matriarchy out of the Ivory City also a heretic? Or is it a heathen? Maybe a blasphemer?”

Mal sputtered, then informed Andolius, “The Basilica is held to be a heretical version of the faith and the Canon.”

“What it is, is nonsense.” His voice became a mocking falsetto, “Oh, you’re actually worshipping Calumnia this, no, we know the right magic words to make the Lady love us that!” He then spat on the rushes of the stone floor, “A pox on the houses of both organized churches. I love the Lady Ilia and Her Son, and will love each of Her new children in turn, but I refuse to hate anyone at someone else’s say so.”

A sharp gasp followed, “Andolius, please don’t discard the church like that...”

Pointing his cutting knife at Malindria, “What is in every version of the Canon? Third verse of the second chapter. You’re a paladin, I expect you to have this memorized.”

Sighing, she recited, “And lo, the Lady and Her children created the many races, and with that, Our Blessed Mother commanded one law above all others, the most important thing is to love each other as you would me, and me as you would love each other. For in loving unconditionally, there is courage above all things, for it leaves one’s heart open.”

“Only verse I need in that dusty old tome, I’ll use the New Canon for everything else, thank you.”

Malindria was forced to relent, “That is one of the better ones.”

“One law above all others, She said, and I’m sticking to that. Speaking of love, tell me about this love of yours. A happier subject than religious schisms and need for reformation.”

That is what she did. She told Andolius everything about Kellintil, about how they met. Their estate abutted the lands of the Foamfollower tribe, and her mother had taken Malindria down to the tribal village to buy trinkets and play with the children of other elves, since her brothers were already adults. She described the wide blue eyes of a teal-skinned elf girl peeking around a hut. That led to detail after detail about how Kellintil looked and felt, down to how her hair smelled of seafoam when they embraced. By the end, she realized she had stopped chopping to stand and moon over her beloved sea elf.

“I can tell you love her. Every word drips with adoration. I’m happy you two have found happiness together. Will you marry her?” Andolius had gotten the water to a solid simmer over the kitchen’s hearth.

“I was planning on asking her after we took Noctus,” admitted the elf, starting to chop once more so that the vegetables could be added to the broth. “Then, when we had spent enough time being happy with each other, I figured we’d ask a consort for each of us so we could have children.

Common practice for women is to have the brother of their spouse get them pregnant, so their children are still blood to them. She has one, and I have two, so Kell could pick..."

Andolius collected the finished vegetables by picking up the cutting board, then just dumping them into the pot. "Don't wait. Ask her, find your joy. That's what I did with Daphne. We were bought by one of the few truly cruel bastards, well our bond was, and he... well..." He huffed, "It's a sad story, not worth going into."

Malindria perked up, her long ears twitching in curiosity, "No, tell me. I... would know the truth of what it's like in Noctus. I've had enough of lies."

"Well, it does go into how we met Aurelia, so there's that. It will tell you more about your half-sister, and what type of person she really is."

"Well, we have time while that simmers. I definitely want to know."

"Aye, mum, if you please, I have a pair right here that might meet your needs."

The flesh peddler wiped his greasy palms on his apron as he pulled aside the curtain to reveal Daphne and Andolius, each only allowed to cover their groins by their owner. It left Daphne topless, arms wrapped around herself to protect her modesty. Both huddled together, glowering at the man and the woman he was showing them both to.

Marius, the flesh peddler, was a sweaty, rotund man. He had been rounding up orphans in the Half-Blood Quarter when he found the pair and stuffed them together in a cage while he confirmed with the Bondsman, an Imperial magistrate, that neither had a paid bond. Without parents, Marius had been given the bond at a fraction of its value and had waited for both to be old enough to sell.

The pair of half-bloods were caught off guard by his prospective client. She was tall and handsome, with russet red hair up in a bun. A well-tailored tunic covered her chest, and she wore pants like a soldier, instead of the dress of a lady. To add to the appearance, a sword hung at her hip.

“They’re old enough? I have no interest in children,” queried the buyer, giving the peddler a look of open contempt.

Marius gave a leering grin, regarding first his client, then Daphne as he stepped forward and pulled her arms away from her chest to force her to reveal herself, “Aye, mum, just barely. They’re both sweet and delectable. Both are pliable, too, so if you want to take them to bed, they won’t say no.”

Daphne sat on the verge of tears as she was forced to expose herself. The moment the peddler’s hands were away from her, she covered herself back up.

“How would you know this, peddler?” the client asked, eyeing the odious little man.

“You think I don’t sample my wares? They wanted privileges, so I let them please me for what they wanted. Both are quite sweet and skilled at whatever you might want.”

The client jabbed a finger hard into the peddler’s chest, “I said I wanted body servants, not a catamite and a concubine.”

Andy wrapped his arms around Daphne, doing his best to add to her modesty. He made no effort to disguise the look of loathing he was casting at Marius. It was the questions the customer had asked that intrigued him. None of those who had viewed them previously seemed to care.

“Oh, understood, mum. They’re both trained at cleaning and helping with complex dresses and hairstyling as any body servant should be. The young man has been tutored with my best chef, as well.” The peddler did not seem fazed by the aggression, just continuing to make his pitch.

“What privileges? And how long?” the customer suddenly asked.

“W-what?”

Her posture tense and aggressive, the customer stepped in close, showing that she dwarfed the greasy merchant. Broad shoulders and a tall frame made her as imposing as any legionary, “I asked you what privileges they asked for that made you fuck the pair of them, and how long you have been doing it.”

Flustered, the merchant stammered, and as the green eyes of his client bored through him, he eventually answered, “Th-they wanted to wear clothes. I let them for any day they... pleased me.” He avoided the second part of the question, the answer being one that the Basilica would not suffer.

Snarling, the buyer turned to the pair, “Did he rape you both before your majority?”

“Don’t answer that!” roared the peddler, “You know not to speak until I tell you!”

Andolius stood agape, not used to being asked anything at all by the procession of clients that had failed to purchase the pair’s bond. It was Daphne who quickly blurted out, “Yes! Yes! I begged him to stop, and he didn’t!”

A response came swiftly as the peddler stepped forward and whipped a slap hard against Daphne’s cheek, “You little slut! You begged for it! Do not lie to the good Ser!”

Tears boiled up and out as Daphne clutched at the livid red mark left behind on her cheek. Andy clung to her as she sobbed, delivering a glower to their bondholder that could have melted mithril with its heat.

“Bring me the bond, merchant. I’ll take both. Now.”

Marius turned and blinked owlishly at the customer. She repeated herself, and he half bowed, “Of course, mum! Now?”

“Now! Leave them with me.”

With those words, the peddler scuttled off to collect the paperwork, leaving the customer with her newly purchased bondsmen. She turned, sighing, as she regarded the pair. “Lady’s Breath, fetch your tunics and clothe yourselves, please.”

That spurred Andolius into action, “Aye, mum.” He grabbed the nearby tunics and covered himself and Daphne, fastening the leather belts of the bonds around each of their waists for himself and his companion. Daphne was still snuffling, one hand covering where she had been struck.

“Your names?” asked their new mistress.

They answered, and after she had learned what to call them, the customer bowed slightly to them, something neither had ever imagined would happen, and introduced herself, “I am Ser Aurelia Constantus Noctanus, and neither of you will be treated like that ever again as long as I live.”

When the peddler returned, he collected a pouch full of clinking coins and gems. Once paid, he then signed over the bonds for both of them. Ser Aurelia inspected the signatures and the seals, then rolled the paperwork up and slid it into her belt.

“It is such an honor to do business with you, mum, and should you need another...” The peddler did not finish his sentence as the woman who had just paid him several hundred consuls worth of wealth drew her sword. A quick, horizontal slice of the blade sent him staggering to one side, clutching at his throat. Blood fountained across the room, splashing against the floor and wall before he collapsed, gagging and gurgling.

Ser Aurelia hawked and spat, landing the gobbet on the dying man’s face, “Fucking rapist of children. Burn in the Hells and rot, bastard.” She stabbed down once into his chest, ensuring the man was dead.

Andy and Daphne stood in awe. Both were dumbfounded and silent as Ser Aurelia wiped her blade clean on the merchant’s clothing. As she stood and sheathed it, Andolius summoned the courage to speak, “Mum, I don’t know what to say, but... thank you. He was a bastard... I...”

Aurelia kicked the pouch of coins and gems over to the pair, away from the hands of the dead peddler, “This is yours. You’ll use it to pay off your bond should you ever wish to leave my service. Your lives belong to you again, but I’d like you to work for me, if you’re willing.”

With that, Aurelia marched the pair out without a hint of worry. Guards confronted them, and she lied and said she had caught Marius attempting to rape both bondsmen while she was signing the paperwork. Andy and Daphne nodded along, confirming every word she said. No Blackshield was willing to dispute the word of a Constantus, of the daughter of Noctus’s greatest hero.

As they walked, Andolius kept his eyes on their new mistress. Something bugged him about her appearance. It took him most of the journey to put his finger on it. Once they reached the Constantus manor, quiet and dusty, the young bondsman decided to confront her about it.

“Mistress Constantus, mum...” he started.

“Don’t call me that, please. Aurelia is fine. Or mum, if you must.”

Daphne beamed, bouncing on the balls of her feet, “Andy, I *like* her.”

That caused their mistress to smile, “Then we’re off to a good start.”

Andolius scowled and cut back in, “Mum, are you docking your ears?”

“Heh,” was the soft response, a wan smile on Aurelia’s face. “See, this is why I fired the staff when I took the manor back from my step-mother. Half-bloods still catch it too quickly.”

Daphne peered at Aurelia for a moment, blue eyes going wide with realization. “Lady’s Breath, she does... are you a half-blood, mum?”

Discovered, and so quickly, Aurelia did not try to hide it further. “My father was, indeed, the great man you’ve likely heard of...” She motioned to the handsome portrait of him that hung in the foyer, one of the few paintings uncovered still, “... but he had flaws like all people, and one of those was that he loved an elf, not his wife.”

Andolius regarded Aurelia curiously, “Mum, can I ask what it is you want of us?”

Aurelia gave him a rueful smile in return, “To be honest, I don’t know. It was impulse that led me there. Maybe I was tired of being alone, but as soon as I saw what he was doing to you both, I felt this knot of hate in my gut... and, well, you know the rest.”

A blonde blur dashed forward as Daphne wrapped up Aurelia in a tight hug, “Thank you. For justice and taking us out of that place.” She turned back to Andolius while still hugging Aurelia, “I told you our prayers to the Lady would be heard.”

“As I said,” Aurelia spoke softly, petting Daphne’s curls, “You will never be harmed as long as I live and can hold a sword.”

“Ask anything you want of us... Aurelia...” Andy grinned as he used her given name instead of some honorific, “... and if it’s in our power, we’ll deliver it.”

Stepping up, he joined Daphne in the hug of their newfound friend. A few moments passed and then he felt her arms circle around them both and begin to squeeze gently. As they held each other, he could feel the tears rolling down her cheeks and into his hair.

Malindria watched Andolius add the last of the spices to the soup mix, followed by several slices of ham. Once the lid was in place, he turned and wiped his hands on the apron he had long since donned. “That’s essentially the long and short of it, Malindria.”

“Mal,” she said softly, “You can call me that if you like. I... she... she saw an injustice and righted it.”

“Isn’t that what paladins are supposed to do?” The half-blood grinned and winked, knowing full well what he was implying.

Mal gave him a mock glower for a moment, but was not truly angry. He had a point, and she was proud that there was decency in her sister's heart. "It is. I... I... maybe I should be more forgiving of her."

"I think you should," Andolius rounded the cutting block that divided them and leaned against it, near to Mal. "I know you were likely brought up in a world ruled by the notions of good versus evil and there not being a lot of space between, but here in Noctus, everything's grey in the shadow of the walls. Your sister's part of that, but in the end, she has love and warmth in her heart. Respect and acknowledge that, and you might find you two truly are sisters."

Mal gave him a soft smile, "Why does it feel like you're trying to help her put her family together?"

Andy patted her gently on the shoulder, "Because I am. Half-bloods have been split apart, sold off, sent from owner to owner for generations. Even ones who know their parents have to be given to auction at their majority. I have no memory of my parents, Daphne only has a few of hers. If I can see a half-blood united with their family..." He gave her a rueful smile, "Well, wouldn't that be something?"

Malindria regarded the half-blood, and an idea bloomed in the back of her head as she considered his words. "That's what she fights for. When she defends the city, it's... it's the half-bloods. Her people."

"I like to think so. Almost as many of us here in Noctus as there are in the Ribbon between the Ghontish lands and Galindir, if I'm not mistaken..."

It forced a giggle out of Malindria at the thought of it, "Oh, the conniption the Basilica and the First Consul would have to learn their great champion's a half-blood."

Andy laughed at that as well, "Oh, Lady's Breath, what a scandal. I'm just sorry it'd tear her apart at this point." He sighed, "I've seen her with her ears fully restored by accident through a healing spell. She's stunningly beautiful with her hair swept back, her ears visible. The daughter of the

most handsome man I've ever seen a portrait of, and one of the two most gorgeous elves I've ever met..."

"Well, if my mother is one of the two, who was the other you've met that was such a beauty?"

"You, of course." Andolius winked as he turned to saunter back over to stir the soup.

The elven paladin flushed, "You know I'm spoken for... and you're married!"

"I know!" he called, "But it's fun to tease your friends!"

"We're friends?"

"Aren't we?"

That brought the smile back to Malindria's features, "We are, I think."

Chapter 8

Hellfire

Pressed on all sides, with only loyal Nalandiel defending Her, our blessed Lady did what must be done to end the rebellion of the traitor gods. With Her power to make and undo, She tore out the foundations of the first Celestial City. It was not cruelty or malice that sent it to crash into our world, but heartbreak. A great comet fell, and in a moment, the ancient world was gone. – Canon of the Son, Chapter 1, Verse 15

Nearly a fortnight after the first assault, the mud between Noctus and the Coalition battle lines was dry. Riders from the High King of Galandir rode directly up to the wall with their white flags of truce, only to discard them into the dried earth and unfurl blood red flags of war. The truce had been declared over. The Noctans did not bother to fire upon them as the three elves rode back towards their own lines; there were better uses for their arrows and bolts.

Minutes later, the bombardment began. Engines roared and rumbled as onagers and trebuchets savaged the wall of Noctus. The engineers of the Coalition had all directed their fire towards one spot, where the last great breach had occurred. Boulders, projectiles, and huge payloads of

alchemical explosives impacted one after the other. Low rumbles and impacts echoed throughout the city. Any and all civilians had been evacuated from the area beyond where the expected breach would be, a large area between Trade Street and Foundry Street. A huge portion of the human population lived and worked in the Trade and Foundry districts, and many had to be coaxed away from everything they owned and practically dragged by Blackshields into the Black Fortress.

On the seventh day of the bombardment, one of the explosive impacts sent a ripple through the wall, and the basalt noticeably dipped towards the center of the old breach. Crenels leaned, then toppled backwards and into the city. Imperial defenders prepared, knowing what was soon to come. It was nearly dark when tremors ran through the entire city, while the wall teetered and then fell backward, crushing any structures too close to the black basalt as it collapsed inward. Additional loads of explosives landed and detonated, scattering rubble and widening the breach.

Coalition regiments roared their approval, lined up and ready to advance. They advanced as one once more and into the maw of battle. A craftier general than the last had devised the plan the united armies used for this assault. Not only did they attack along the entire length of Noctus's wall, while giantish shocktroopers rushed the breach, Nephilim infiltrators slipped into the sewers unknown to the defenders, only to emerge within the city itself. The Shadow Fleet was forced to fight in the lee of the Black Fortress, barely able to escape their own dockyards due to the massing of the enemy flotilla against it. Elven swans and Ghontish battlebarges sailed boldly close to Noctus, knowing its cannons would have too many targets to deal with.

Imperial siegework rained hell into the opposing lines, but numbers were telling as the giants forced their way through the breach. Mages of the Imperial College fought duels in the sky with archmages of the Ivory City's Chancellory, and the bodies of arcane spell casters fell one at a time, burned beyond recognition to impact some poor soul's rooftop.

Battle raged beneath the shadow of Mount Noct, the lives of men and women fueling the grindstone of war.

At the breach, Blackshield guardsmen and citizen militia stood no chance against the giants. Their lines buckled immediately upon impact with ten to fifteen foot high monsters swinging mithril mauls the size of a man.

Crushed or split in twain by their axes, the Blackshields routed and fled deeper into the city. Ghontish footmen and halberdiers followed in behind the giants. Defenders were forced to give up cross street after cross street, trading buildings and space for time.

Noctus's western wall and the Foundry Street gate were overrun, Ghontish and Galand foot troops flooding up basalt watch towers to attack the guardians of the wall from the rear. Blackshield companies collapsed when rushed from below while dealing with scaling ladders. Giants forced the massive steel bars up and out of their brackets for both the inner and outer doors, and Noctus's western gate swung open, inviting even more regiments into that side of the city.

Coalition forces surged into Noctus, pouring down Foundry Street and chasing Blackshields back towards the Black Fortress itself. The Foundry Street gate of the fortress yawned open, almost inviting the attackers to rush towards it. It was then that the mysteriously absent Nineteenth Legion was found, shields locked in testudo formation, nearly half the Order of Saint Sanguis at their heart.

Letting the routing Blackshields through their formation, the legionaries and knights slammed their shield wall closed with practiced efficiency. It was the Ghontish men who met the wall first, only to be cut down easily for their lack of discipline. When the first giant attempted to shatter the line, the knights broke formation. Ser Aurelia Constantus hamstrung the creature with Defiance, sending it toppling forward to the ground. The rest mobbed it, proving that giants could fall to a knight's blade when put into the right spot.

Allied forces continued to follow the path of least resistance. They built up throughout the Foundry district and part of the Trade district. Some broke discipline to start looting, thinking the war was already won, tearing through homes looking for bits of hidden treasure or coin. Those who learned too early what was really happening died quickly as they stumbled into the massive firebreak that had been torn down through the center of the Trade district. The rest were funneled through winding alleys they had no clue how to navigate, past cross streets that had been boarded over with ten foot high barricades. Always, the path led towards Foundry Street and its unnaturally empty forges and structures.

Second Legion soldiers and the rest of the Knights of Saint Sanguis made certain none who ventured out of the desired area of the city made it back to their units to report. They put out small emergencies, such as the devilkin infiltrators coming up out of the sewers as well, or when half a regiment of Felisan soldiers leapt from rooftop to rooftop to land on Trade Street itself. The last of which was speared by a hurled javelin before making it back to their fellows.

It was Pullo, overlooking the city from the galleries of the Black Fortress, who nodded to the Imperial archmage, who acted as her adjutant, to give the order to enact Aurelia's plan. Enough were in the city that the message would be sent, it was decided. Pullo smiled happily, humming a jaunty tune as she pulled her helmet with its red bristle on and descended to the lower halls to mount her steed.

Stepping onto the gallery, the archmage fired a bright green flare with his magic across the city. The signal had been given, and throughout Noctus, fuses were lit.

"Potions! Now!" Ser Aurelia ordered as she saw the green flare bathe the city in its light. Pullo had waited longer than she had liked to give the order, and enemies were starting to pile up deep enough at the Foundry Street gate that it was getting concerning. She kicked a Ghontish knight away from her, then pulled a potion from her belt and quaffed it quickly. It stank

and tasted so thoroughly of sulfur, it threatened to make her gag. She got it down, tossing the empty vial into the face of the knight as he came back at her. As he was trying to get glass shards out of his visor, she put Defiance's blade through his throat and then ripped it out one side, dropping the knight to the cobbles.

Over the course of the war, Noctus had manufactured vast reserves of Ilian Fire. The components for it arrived regularly from Calexis, and it typically only took a little to scare off another doomed assault on the walls. This had left them with a huge reservoir of the cruel liquid. Over the previous two weeks, the engineers and alchemists of Noctus had spent every moment of their time filling the basements and homes of the western district of the city with Ilian Fire. It packed the walls, filled old ale casks, and every other possible mundane item it could be hidden within. Some basements, locked via all entrances, were filled to the brim with it. Fuses ran throughout the city in underground channels, hidden from the invading army. Once lit, there was no stopping them.

It was then, in their moment of triumph, with a third of the city overrun, that the army of the Coalition was immolated along with most of the Foundry District. What had happened at the Trade Gate's parkam had only been a preview of the monstrous destruction and havoc wreaked throughout the city and its attackers. Flames raced up out of buildings and basements with no warning, engulfing entire structures in moments. Buildings blazed with such heat that the clothes and tabards of those between them caught fire due to the intensity. Armor superheated and melted into slag around its wearers, boiling the men and women inside it alive.

Troops panicked and tried to run. Those that hid burned, and those that tried to make it back to the breach never had a chance of that, either. Reserves of the powder that Gorgon and Minotaur used to fire their cannonballs had been laid along the most obvious escape routes, including the breach and the parkam of the Foundry Street Gate. Ironically, also within the old tunnels that had once held the explosives that brought down the wall during the first battle, dug back out by the Imperial engineers.

Delayed fuses also led to these reserves, and just as the army was starting to buckle and rout, explosives turned the last remaining safe passages into deathtraps. The breach itself buckled upwards before collapsing, turning from a low pile of scree into a shattered crater full of burning Ilian Fire. Fully sprung, all that was left for those in the trap was to finish burning to death.

Aurelia, her knights, and the men of the Nineteenth were scoured by the flames. It was scalding hot, but something they could survive as they retreated back through the Foundry Street gate and into the Black Fortress itself. The screams of men and giants alike followed them through as portcullis and gate slammed shut behind the fleeing Imperials. Half-blood servants doused them with water as they came through, armor plates still steaming hot and hissing from the sudden cooling liquid. Only the potions, the strongest an alchemist could make that were proof against flames, had kept them alive long enough to retreat from the hellish heat. No one wanted to test their efficacy for longer than they already had.

Taking several deep breaths, Aurelia had to tell herself she needed to see what had happened. This was her idea, she reminded herself; she should not shy away from it. Watching men and women melt before her eyes was not something she wanted as a memory, but it would not flee her.

Ascending one of the staircases to an artillery gallery, Aurelia found a spot where she could watch the part of the plan she knew made Pullo ready to accept it. Just as the fuses had been lit, the Second Legion and several cohorts of Order knights marched out of the Half-Blood gate and flanked the attacking troops from the east. They routed regiment after regiment, assaulting the walls, and reached the breach shortly after the immolation had begun. Any troops that had somehow gotten past the breach or the open gate to flee the flames were simply butchered. The knight noted that Pullo had the Second's banners flying high and their horns and drums playing a jaunty marching tune.

The old bulldog was rubbing the High King's nose in what she had just done to his army. After she was done humiliating him, Pullo turned the

Second around and marched right back to the Half-Blood Gate, then into the city. There was a certain, grim finality to the sound of the gates of Noctus shutting behind the legion. With that, the horns of Galandir called retreat to what little remained, urging the Coalition back to the siege line.

The Second Battle of the Great Breach was over, and the Imperials had won decisively.

“There she is!” Pullo grinned broadly as she found Aurelia in the great hall of the Black Fortress’s ground level.

The old bulldog walked right up to Aurelia and embraced her, giving her a firm hug, “What a plan! I can see you have your father’s mind! Ha ha!” She gave several hard slaps to Aurelia’s back before letting her go.

Aurelia gave a wan smile, “Thank you, mum. We can but live to serve, and if it ends this damn war quicker, then let’s get it done.”

Another hard slap on the pauldron was the reward for Aurelia’s words, “Just so! Tiberius!” She used the First Knight’s given name, “This is the woman who should be captain of your First, not that lunk Steno! She has the pedigree, the brains, and the ruthlessness that I love to see!”

“She is one of my best, mum, of that there is no doubt,” rumbled the First Knight, trying to deflect the embarrassment of having an outsider criticize the internal structure of the Order. Steno stood behind the First Knight, but wisely kept his mouth shut, expression unreadable with his visor down. Clenched fists and a barely restrained tremor gave away the Captain of the First’s irritation. Aurelia could almost hear the grinding of teeth from beneath the closed helm.

Contented with the response, Pullo turned back to half-blooded knight, “You, my dear Aurelia, I want at my side when we march into Galandir. I want someone who thinks like me to tear that pissant off his throne and

sack the city. I will make you wealthy beyond the dreams of the First Consul himself with the share of the spoils.”

Keeping the impassive mask of the Knight-Captain in place, Aurelia nodded, “You do me an honor, mum. I am satisfied with my own cohort, as I love my men, and I know Steno’s career has always been illustrious. I am certain he acquitted himself bravely today.”

A handful of the knights nearby all added noises of appreciation and the occasional ‘Good form’ murmured just loud enough that Aurelia’s gifted ears could pick it up. She could even make out Steno grunting appreciatively. The Order being happy with her was far more important to what she thought about herself than anything Pullo said.

“Humble, too! Hah!” Pullo patted Aurelia’s breastplate, then turned to start to work the room, pressing palms and offering congratulations to key officers.

Aurelia stepped up to the First Knight, “Apologies, Ser. She takes liberties, as the Proconsul.”

The elder knight grunted, “Not your fault. You don’t need to assuage my feelings.”

Giving her superior a hopeful look, Aurelia asked, “Think that is the end of it, Ser? Will Theonar finally give up this madness and just go home?”

“Even I would figure out how bad my losses were before I made the call, but based on the guesses so far...” The First Knight shook his head to indicate what his instincts were telling him, “... I would quit the field as fast as I could and fall back to the fortresses of Caer Aldwell and Caer Galand.”

Aurelia nodded in agreement, “Those are my thoughts. That would allow us to reclaim at least out to the Consul’s Knot. I always thought we should have built a citadel there instead of just a toll bridge. The next war can be out there, not at the front gate of Noctus.”

He gave her a thin smile, “You know the First Consul wants more than just Consul’s Knot.”

She sighed at him, “A lot more. I know.”

“I’ll do what I can, Ser Aurelia, but when Empire commands, we must obey.” He clapped her shoulder, gave her his congratulations, then moved to follow after the Proconsul.

Noctus burned for a week.

There was no fear of a second assault coming in through the breach, and volunteers walked the wall to close the gate, as anything west of the firebreak was a picture of the Hells themselves. More effort was spent hunting down infiltrators and devilkin within the sewers than Coalition regulars in the streets. Citizen militias made a sport of finding the few survivors and then hanging the bodies from the walls.

A pall of smoke hung low over the battlefield. Ash rained down on city and sieger alike, leaving everything covered in a thin film of grey. A larger portion of that film used to be people than anyone was comfortable with.

Outside the city, the Coalition sat sullenly in their siege camp. No new assault appeared planned, but they remained firmly planted behind their palisades and siege tents. Every few hours, a desultory bombardment was flung towards the city, a handful of projectiles to remind Noctus that they remained.

What was clear was that the giants appeared to be gone. None of their banners remained within the camp, and their losses had been egregious for a race with so few numbers to begin with. Without them and with such heavy casualties, the Coalition forces would only be a hollow shell of what they had once been. No longer feeling immediately threatened, Imperial mages and stoneshapers began the work of dragging basalt back into

position and closing the breach, much as they had done after the first Battle of the Great Breach.

Released from immediate need, Aurelia staggered back into her own home. Frequent nightmares of men and women melting in front of her had made sleep unobtainable most nights. She was exhausted and still stank of sulfur.

“Daph! Andy!” she called out as she kicked her front door shut and began working the gauntlets off her hands. Multiple pairs of running feet could be heard, and she had just gotten her hands free as all four residents of the home emerged into the front room.

Daphne and Andolius looked as pleased as ever, both rushing to hug her. She squeezed them back gently and kissed the crowns of both their heads. “I need a bath, badly.”

Daphne’s nose wrinkled, “Lady’s Breath, you certainly do. I’ll go get that started...” She retreated to begin drawing the requested bath.

It was Malindria and Lilandria who both gave her far darker looks. Her mother broke the silence between them. “The west side of the city goes up in a pillar of fire, and you walk in like you’ve just finished some great chore. What happened, Aurelia?”

Aurelia held her arms up as Andolius began to help her get out of the heavy plate armor. Exhaustion lent her to letting him do all the work and just holding position as his practiced hands got her out of the equipment. “They broke the wall where my father died, like I guessed they would. So, we set a trap.”

“How many people lost their homes and lives for your trap!” shouted Malindria, pounding a fist on the banister she was leaning against.

“We evacuated all the civilians! Let them take their wealth and as much as they could carry!” protested Aurelia. “The only people who died were either defenders of this city, people who gave their lives to maintain the illusion of a rout, or invaders! There was a point to the cruelty, I swear it!”

Malindria took a slow breath, taking a moment to remember, then asked, “Okay, please make me understand.”

Getting out of the last of her armor, Aurelia accepted a tunic from Andy with the Constantus family crest stenciled onto it. As she pulled it on, she explained, “Bloody the nose of the Coalition so bad it has to withdraw. They need to go home! End this goddess-forsaken war! If we have to be monsters to make the killing end, then that’s what we’ll be!”

“But they haven’t, have they?” Lilandria asked, arms crossed over her chest, “Otherwise there’d be celebrations in the street.”

Aurelia pinched at the bridge of her nose, “No. That part I don’t understand. Any general worth their salt would withdraw. There’s not enough men out there for another go.”

Mal protested, “The Coalition is fighting for the freedom of the bonded and enslaved, Aurelia! They are holding on to...”

“All they’re holding onto now is Theonar’s pride!” snapped Lilandria at her youngest. “Tell me, is the council still deadlocked? The Chancellor not ready to remove Theonar for the prince?”

Malindria quieted and looked away, one hand holding her other arm as she looked anywhere but at her mother in embarrassment.

Aurelia raised a brow, “Wait... you’re saying that Theonar’s a single vote away from being taken off the throne by his own people?”

“Twas the case before I slipped into Noctus, Aurelia, seems to still be. Galandir and Tor Ghontir are bankrupt. They have to sack the city to save their own finances, and the Chancellor is the High King’s cousin. It’s the only reason he’s not been forced to abdicate.”

Aurelia growled in frustration, “But for the vanity of fools, thousands of people would still be alive today!” She grabbed one of her gauntlets from the armor rack and hurled it across the foyer with a great clatter, “May Calumnia feast on their stupid fucking souls! I watched the flesh of men

and women, victims of this insane pride, melt from their bodies, and I had to harden my heart!"

Andolius scuttled away as Aurelia kicked and thrashed at her own armor stand, sending plate and chain scattering away, "All I hear are the screams when I close my eyes now! All I can smell is the stink of their burning flesh! JUST GO HOME! FOR THE LOVE OF THE GODDESS!"

"Relly, please...!" cried out the bondsman as he chased after tossed armor.

Lily and Mal both rushed across the room to their kin. Arms circled around Aurelia and helped guide her to a chair even as she thrashed and lashed out. Soft murmurs of support began to calm her. Andolius joined in, resting his head on Aurelia's lap. The half-blood knight petted Andy's hair as her mother hugged her shoulders, and her sister wrapped both arms around one of Relly's.

Leaning forward, Relly placed a gentle kiss on the tip of Andy's ear, right on the point, then sighed. She let her forehead rest against his hair, then admitted. "It was my idea."

That startled even Andolius, "What?"

Both of the elves took a half step away, breathing slowed in apprehension as Aurelia admitted further, "I came up with the whole plan, pitched it to the commanders, and they chose to do it. I wanted... I wanted..." She looked away, unable to meet any gaze as she figured out the wording, "I wanted to scare them so badly, prove to them we'd do anything, so they'd run away back to their homelands." Her voice was small, barely audible even to the hearing of those with her, "... I'm a fucking monster. Truly my father's daughter."

"No," Lily's voice was soothing as she stepped back in to hold her daughter once more, "Your father never would have done that. Walk into the fire himself? Certainly, but that?" The elder elf shook her head before admitting, "I'm self-aware enough to know that is my side of you coming

through. I'm the pragmatist and murderer, your father was always the kind, decent one."

Conflicted emotions played out over Malindria's features. The paladin fidgeted and then murmured, "I need time to think." She withdrew, vanishing into another part of the house.

When Daphne reappeared to announce the bath was ready, it was a reprieve. Aurelia disappeared within the bath and shut the door, locking everyone else out to give herself time alone.

Aurelia found her sister sitting at her father's desk in his study, the family copy of the Canon of the Lady open in front of her. The holy text had been passed from one member of the Constantus family to the next for generations. It was beautifully illuminated by scribe slaves on Calexis long ago.

"Sorry," Aurelia murmured, "I hadn't realized you were in here." She had come to spend time reading more loliás, to find an escape, and began to withdraw.

"Wait," Mal called after her, "Stay, please."

"Do you even want to see my face at the moment?" Aurelia settled into the chair across the desk from her father's seat, one she had sat in many times when she was younger.

"I do, yes." Malindria gave a thin smile, "I had a talk with Andy about you, and he put some things in perspective. Those two servants think incredibly highly of you."

"They're my best friends," admitted Aurelia. She fidgeted in her chair and decided this felt eerily similar to the talks she had once upon a time with her father.

Mal turned another page in the Canon, showing the gentle care that the tome had earned. “I loved the family tree at the beginning. Tracing this volume through the hands of each of its owners. That’s something you don’t see with elves, but humans love to pass things down to each other.”

“We like to leave our mark on the world,” Aurelia said, using “we” without thinking.

“It’s due to their short span, I suppose.” Another page was carefully turned, “Your illustrations of the Lady and Her Son all have rounded ears, but that’s not surprising. There are a couple apocryphal chapters as well...”

“Don’t tell me you’ve found the source of our great schism through a simple reading of the Imperial version of the Canon,” Aurelia mocked lightly, but her heart did not feel like it was really in the attempt.

A soft chuckle came, showing her sister did not take offense, “No, what I’m really saying is that the differences are... niggling. If you throw away the awful readings that the Basilica uses to justify slavery as an existential right of humanity, everything else is... petty and pointless. Even the apocryphal chapters are only a little more... aggressive... than what I’m used to.”

“In short, we kill each other for nothing.”

“In short, we kill each other for nothing,” agreed Malindria. Gingerly, she flipped back to the beginning, where the family tree was. There, it showed Severan’s name next to Julia’s, leading to Aurelia. “Though, to be honest, this was the biggest flaw I found in the book.”

Aurelia shrugged, “It would be expected to be there.”

Malindria searched through the desk before producing quill and ink, “I would like to fix it.”

Aurelia gave a dark look, “That’s my family’s Canon.”

“Your father’s Canon, and he was your family, but your mother and your sister are also your family. This Julia? Every word I have heard about her marks her as your tormentor, and she is nothing to you but that. This...”

One slender finger tapped Julia's name on the tree, "... is a lie, and my sister deserves better than that."

Aurelia snorted, "Start by telling Lily that."

That earned a roll of Malindria's eyes, "Please. My father may have been a far different person than what I knew, but he once told me that we can't always force others to account, but we can always hold ourselves to the standards the Blessed Lady demands. Whatever his faults were, and I'm rapidly learning he had many, I think that advice was sound. Mother may be a scoundrel and a liar, but what do *you* choose to be, Aurelia?"

"Lady's Breath," Aurelia murmured the phrase, "Why do I like a bloody paladin so much?" She leaned forward over the desk and took the quill and ink from her sister. It did not take much to strike out Julia's name from the family tree and pen 'Lilandria Caulithil' in its place.

"I'm just easy to like," grinned Malindria. "It's bizarre for me, too. You're a Bloody Saint, one of their Captains, and yet... I get it. Even why you came up with your plan. A little pain now to save worse later, like lancing a boil."

"Thank you," sighed Aurelia. "That was what I was hoping people would understand."

"Why do you do it? Fight for these people? This empire that would enslave you, no matter who your father was?" Her tone was soft, accusation set aside to try to find understanding.

Aurelia tugged gently at an ear, an old habit, then took her sister back to the day of getting prepared to be enrolled as a squire.

"Stand up straight!" A ruler slapped hard into Aurelia's back, forcing the young woman to stand taller. Growth spurts had set her to towering over her tiny step-mother and governess.

“Yes, mother!” Aurelia called out as she was corrected.

Julia stalked around her “daughter”. Age was starting to show on the human’s features, no matter how thick the make-up she applied was. Color had been washed through her hair, turning the soft blonde locks a straw yellow in an effort to chase the grey away. She was not all that old, still in her forties, but too much poppy weed ages a person. Of late, she had been frittering away money on creams and lotions to keep her skin smooth, according to the snake oil salesmen who peddled it.

“Your sixteenth nears, and you will be taken to the Order and handed over as a squire. You will make your family proud, correct?”

“Yes, mother!”

Julia nodded and leaned back against her dead husband’s desk. She tapped her chin in thought with the ruler as she regarded her step-daughter before barking out, “What are you?”

“A Constantus, mother! Issue of my beloved father and mother!”

“What are you!?” She cried again, louder.

“Human! I am the sole daughter of my beloved and beautiful mother, Julia Constantus!”

Julia whipped a hard slap across Aurelia’s cheek, who righted herself quickly from the blow, “What is elven blood?”

“Disease, Mother! Corruption and perversion of the flesh, of which only bondage or death is a worthy penalty!”

“Yes!” hissed the small blonde woman, “Just as the Bishop decrees each Lady’s Day!” Reaching up, she grabbed at an earlobe and pulled the younger woman down to her level, “What do you have to say to me for taking those nasty little tips off your ears?”

Aurelia winced, but knew better than to cry, “Thank you, Mother! You have done so much for me! To ensure I can become a knight, to honor my father. I will make you proud as well!”

A languid smile formed on Julia’s features as she released the offending ear, “You’re very welcome, my dearest daughter.” Every word dripped with obvious scorn as she spoke. “And while you’re away playing war, doing whatever it is that knights do to get themselves killed, who will be taken care of as they should be?”

“You will, Mother! I’ve already signed the note for the solicitor. When I am sixteen, I will hand it to him, and it has instructions to keep you maintained here in the manor.”

“Wonderful! See, it took a bit of work, but you have made me proud, Aurelia!” She spread both arms out wide, “Now, come hug your mother and kiss her cheek, then go start packing.”

Relly did as she was bidden, giving Julia both a hug and a quick kiss on the cheek. As soon as the gesture was complete, Julia pushed her away, wanting no further contact with the girl she had been grooming since her husband’s death.

Halfway out the door to start her packing, Julia called out to her, forcing the young woman to look back at her step-mother.

“And remember, little Relly, if they ever find out about what you are... what you really are, everything he built dies. They will tear his image down, shatter his statue, and the name Constantus will wither on the vine. Only you can save that. Now be a good girl, become a knight, and die in his name.”

Julia’s vicious little smile followed the human girl out of the room and into her memories.

“She sat in this house, spending father’s money like water, until she died of an overdose about... eight years ago.” Aurelia offered as a conclusion. “I let myself forget she existed, be swallowed up by knighthood. Then, out of nowhere, there’s a funeral to plan.”

Malindria was blunt, “I hate your step-mother.”

A rueful smile and a chuckle were returned to the paladin, “You and I, both. Worse was having to pretend to mourn her. I was *elated*, dancing on clouds, and I had to pretend to be all upset. About six weeks after that, I bought Andy and Daph’s bond. I was tired of wandering around an empty house, I guess, and... well, that was a good decision, at least.”

“Andy made sure to educate me about what you did for them, even after I was an utter ass to him.” Mal rubbed at her eyes, “Everything is grey in the shadow of the walls.”

Aurelia grinned at her sibling, “You really are listening to him.”

“What Julia said, made you say, please be honest with me here,” Mal kept her voice soft, pleading, “Do you really think that way about elven blood? Or even others that do not have human ancestry?”

Aurelia fidgeted, then admitted softly, “When the Lady’s Guard came charging through the Trade Gate, I only heard you all because I’ve got the hearing of a half-blood. I gave the orders to form the shield wall, which was part and parcel why your brethren fared so poorly. It’s stupid, blind luck I still have a sister. Lady’s Breath, I was a heartbeat away from killing you myself, and the man I should be thanking for stopping me, instead, I gutted.”

“That’s not an answer,” pressed the paladin, her tone still gentle.

“I know, I know.” Aurelia shifted and fidgeted again, then confessed, “When I’m on the field of battle, in my armor and in front of my men, every hint of indecision leaves me. Here, when it’s quiet, and I have time to think, it feels like I can never decide anything. That includes me and what I want to be.”

Hell, I kept our mother in a cage for a year because I couldn't bring myself to let her go."

Malindria regarded her sibling with her head tilted, but kept her features and tone clear of judgment, "Tell me about that, then. Why? Your first answer that comes to mind, don't think about it, just like on the battlefield."

"I didn't want her to run away again," blurted out Aurelia. Her eyes went wide after she said it. Both hands shot up and covered her mouth. There was a long silence, then tears streaked down her cheeks, her hands still in place over her lips.

A sympathetic smile settled onto Malindria, "Now, that's a feeling I know too well. Twenty-nine years prior, there's a hole in my childhood where she was missing. I know now she dithered here, in this city, with her newfound lover. When returned to us, she always felt like she was going through the motions of motherhood. The only real smiles I remember from her were when she would watch Kell and me play. That seemed to make her happy. Then she up and left in the middle of the night, vanished with a note that said she would be in Noctus and home soon with something dearly precious to her."

"Me," admitted Aurelia as she wiped at her tears, "How can someone so cynical as her be that overly optimistic? She appeared in my room dead of night, and I woke with a dagger at my throat. Relly, my love, she said to me, I'm your mother and going to take you home to your family!" Aurelia laughed at the ridiculousness of it, "I tossed her off, and we tussled, and she ended up with a vase to the side of her head and unconscious. I dragged her to the kennel after that."

Malindria giggled, "Really? The master rogue, spy, and assassin got knocked upside the head and dropped into a dog pen?"

"That she did."

The giggles got louder and harder as Aurelia joined her sister, the pair giggling furiously at the plight of their parent's dignity. They were both wiping away tears by the end of the laughing fit.

"She... she's really all those things?" Aurelia asked her sister after catching her breath.

"Aye. She is. She promises me she's good at them, but so far hasn't proven it." She considered for a moment, "It also makes more sense now, during that last big attempt at negotiation, when she got home, she was positively mooning over your father. My father was annoyed and stomping around the house the whole time."

Aurelia scowled, "He never mentioned he saw Lily again after she left that first time when I was four or five. He told me, of their time together, that he exiled Julia to the guest room and lived with our mother as his wife. She shared his marriage bed, they were actively trying for a second child, but it never happened..."

"Then by all elven standards, she truly was unfaithful to father." Malindria hmphed in the back of her throat, "I'm still trying to figure out if I'm angry at her, him, or both. With our long lives, it's expected a dalliance will happen here and there, but... treating them as your spouse? That's infidelity by all accord."

"That's what I have to reconcile... without that string of events I wouldn't even be..."

Malindria tapped the desk to draw Aurelia's attention to the present, "True enough, and Aurelia, back to my original question. What do you think of elven blood? Again, your first answer that you think of, no pondering."

Aurelia scowled, but answered, "It shouldn't be treated any different than others." She blinked at herself, then smiled, "A man I know, a good man in fact, told me 'I don't care what ears the man who watches my back has', and I like that philosophy. If you're my shieldmate, you could be a stuntie

for all I care, and the only thing I'll do is tie ribbons in your beard when you're sleeping."

"I like this man you're quoting. Who is he?"

"Um," Aurelia flushed, "Well, he gave me his token..." She pulled off the lyre engraved ring she had kept safely on her left middle finger and set it on the desk in front of her sister.

"A token!" laughed Malindria, "My beloved gave me a token of her hair long ago, and I the same to her. But I thought you were with your..."

The flush only deepened on Aurelia, "We keep each other warm at nights, but they're trying for a child of their own. When that happens, I've always known I'll need another bed, and um, I... he looks very smart in his Tribune's regalia."

Malindria teased, "You're saying he's handsome?"

"Maybe."

"Now, answer me this, sister of mine, did you give him a token in return?"

Ducking her head, Aurelia mumbled the affirmative. Elven hearing was sharp enough to catch it. Malindria giggled and clapped her hands, "Good for you." There was a pause as Mal beamed at her sheepish sibling before she added, "I didn't get to do any of this with my brothers. Talk about romantic interests and sit and figure life out..."

"Brothers?" That got Aurelia's attention as she blinked in confusion at Mal.

"Oh, you wouldn't know... You have two brothers, Aurelia. They're... oh, about two hundred or so years older than both of us. A rare twin birth, rare for elves that is. Kelanthil and Dalanthil. Kelan and Dalan, as I know them."

"Um, I guess it's bad form to ask, but... how old is our mother?"

Malindria giggled, "It's fine. She was born in the year two fifty-five by the Imperial calendar, so about five centuries old."

"And... that's all of your... our... siblings?"

The paladin nodded, “Aye. So, I have three siblings, now. You and our two brothers. I think this is why Mother wanted to bring you to Galandir so badly, get you with folks who would care for you. I can appreciate the sentiment, if not how she went about it.”

Aurelia rubbed at the back of her neck, “Frankly, this is overwhelming.”

“I don’t mean it to be.”

“I know, let me just focus on you and Mother for now. Lady’s Breath, I’m bad at this whole family thing.”

Gently closing the Constantus family’s Canon, Malindria stood and walked around the desk, “No one’s perfect. Look at the mess Mother made, and she’s had centuries more experience than either of us.”

Following suit, Aurelia stood as well, “Maybe in that way, she and I are alike, utter wrecks outside of our element.”

Malindria laughed, “Perhaps, and we’re both a bit more like our fathers as well. All except in one way...” She opened her arms, “So that I do not presume, I’d like to embrace you, Sister.”

“What? Why?” Aurelia gave her sister a confused look.

“Because you’re my sibling and I want to give you a hug? Because I think you need it?” She grinned, “Because I am not exclusively my father’s daughter, and I do not hate you.”

“All good enough reasons, I suppose,” Aurelia acceded and stepped into the embrace. She felt herself be hugged, squeezed gently, and then offered the same in return. There was a long moment of silence between them before Aurelia let herself sigh and relax, just letting herself receive affection.

“If you must spend all your days wearing a mask, know you don’t need it with me. Be yourself, Relly, please.” Mal planted a sisterly kiss on her sibling’s cheek, then pulled away to let Aurelia see her smile. “Then, when

this war is over, Mother and I can go home to Galandir, and you can visit, see our home and the Ivory City. Meet your brothers, too!"

Relaxed and at ease, Aurelia wished she had never said what came out of her mouth next. She meant it well enough, wanting to see Malindria somewhere far away from what was to come.

"Tor Ghontir, or even the Dwarven kingdom, would be safer for you after the siege ends."

Chapter 9

Battles Upon Sea and Soul

Those who control the sea control the world, dear friend. Once we make it home, we alone will know these new lands. Those maps, the annals of what you can find upon the Broken Isles, will be the riches of the ages. – Iolias to his Bosun, explaining why they should keep trying to get home,

The Travels of Iolias

Kellintil Foamfollower ducked into the tent of Captain Wavelash, her superior, and the liaison between the Swan Fleet and the Coalition's high command. She had waited until late into the evening, as the dark closed in, to speak to him, as there was less chance of a passerby hearing the conversation. An older member of the Marulami tribe, the sea elf looked tired as he turned and looked up at the young ensign. The grey in his hair had doubled over the last several weeks.

“What is it?” There were no honorifics or acknowledgment of rank, just exhaustion, as Captain Indirial Wavelash addressed his aide-de-camp.

She still saluted her superior, but only received a nod in response. Putting her hand down, Kellintil gave him a wan smile, “Sir, I... I would like to resign my commission and go home.”

“Lady’s Breath...” murmured the captain as he pinched at the bridge of his nose with a pair of webbed fingers. “You must be joking.”

“No, I... No, sir, I am not joking.”

“Explain yourself, Foamfollower. I have no interest in telling my brother and sister-in-law why their daughter might end up facing desertion charges.”

She had not expected him to immediately give in to her request, so she began what she had already rehearsed in her tent, “Sir, at this point, I feel that my being here would be a greater detriment than my leaving would be. I feel that despair has set in not only for myself, but among the men and women of this camp, and I cannot, in good faith, continue this work.”

He grunted before going quiet for a moment, “You’re right about despair having set in throughout the camp. I can’t deny that, but having someone who only carts around a spyglass all day...”

Kellintil cleared her throat, “I also run your messages, clean up your tent, handle various errands, help arrange when you want to take a tryst with that handsome wood elf in the middle of a deployment...”

“Fine! Point made, you do more than carry around a ceremonial spyglass...”

“... and I’ve also lost the love of my life, her father and her mother, beyond those accursed walls! All I can see when I look at them is the woman I was going to marry and wonder how she died!” Tears came unbidden as she ranted, “There’s nothing for me here anymore but death! I want to go back to my tribe! I want to spend my mourning period someplace where I can still feel her presence, like the places we met and played as children!”

“Trust me, I sympathize, but the High King insists...”

“Calumnia take his rotten soul! Fuck the High King and his pride! We should’ve withdrawn after what happened! They fired a third of their own fucking city, Uncle Indi! That is the measure of their resolve! These Imperials are madmen, willing to burn everything to leave us nothing but ashes, even if we took the city! Let them and Theonar have each other, as I am done with this affair!” She gesticulated wildly as her volume ratcheted up further and further, leaving the younger elf panting and purple in the face.

“Fine,” the captain breathed out the surrender, defeat in his voice, “Hand me the letter, and I will accept it. Take off those braids, take whatever horse you can find, and go home. At least your mother won’t hang me, even if the admiralty might.”

Kellintil rushed forward and wrapped both arms around the captain’s shoulders, “Thank you, Uncle Indi.”

Hugging his niece gently, he sighed, “You’re infuriating, but I love you. Get yourself out of this hell while I figure out how to do the same for myself.”

“You’ll figure it out, Uncle, I have fai—“ Kellintil’s attempt at comfort was cut off by the rattle of one of the boxes that the captain kept on his tent’s writing desk. Within was the bauble the Lord Admiral of the combined Ghontish and Elven fleets had the mirror of, allowing the two to communicate within moments.

Holding a finger up to his lips to indicate silence, Wavelash opened the box and pulled the swan-shaped brooch out of the box. “Sir?”

“Wavelash! Wavelash! You need to … command …” Heavy crashing sounds drowned out portions of what the Admiral was attempting to say.

“Sir, I can barely hear you! Are you under fire?” The captain stood, still holding the brooch as worry etched his features.

“Heavily engaged … the Strait! Imperial … barges charged through … the Shadow Fleet came out of … them! … Armada is here! All … Wavelash!”
Distant explosions echoed over the link, followed by more crashing sounds.

The Captain paled as he heard the word Armada. Pointing at Kellintil, “I un-accept your resignation. Bring the spyglass. Quickly!”

Kellintil could not put any coherent response together, so grabbed the spyglass from its storage, but left its pillow behind. Following the Captain, she found herself ascending the scaffolding that abutted a trebuchet undergoing repairs. The distance was less than fifty feet, but the entire time, the brooch was making extremely disconcerting noises.

Holding his hand back for it, the Captain demanded the spyglass. It was offered, and he extended it. Magic hummed as the power of it enabled clear vision regardless of day, night or visibility. Though, at night, even Kellintil could see distant lights flaring to life and then dying far off in the waters of the inland sea and the Strait that Noctus commanded. As if to accentuate the veracity of it, the Black Fortress’s guns opened fire on distant targets, adding low thunder that was echoed shortly after by the brooch.

“Wavelash! ... the High King knows! ... not ... able to hold ... fleet ... bracketed... and... Lady’s Breath! GET THOSE FIRES OUT! ... RAMMING, HARD ... PORT...” A crunching sound, close to deafening, emanated from the brooch, followed by, **“REPEL BOARDERS!”** Only silence followed.

The Captain said nothing, instead offering the spyglass to Kellintil. His hand was shaking as she took it from him, then extended it as he had done. Her sight narrowed and extended, allowing her to see the drama unfolding in the Sea of Scales. Great barges and boarding triremes flying the Imperial colors had mobbed the Coalition fleet. She was able to spot even a handful of quinqueremes, wooden goliaths, with bronze ram prows nearly half the size of an elven sloop, one of which had crashed prow-first into the side of the Lord Admiral’s flagship. At least a two, if not three to one advantage. Graceful elven swans and heavily armored Ghontish cruisers alike were floundering one after the other, either broken apart by massed fire, or scuttled by Imperial marines. Even the black sails of the Shadow Fleet

prowled among the chaos, thought defeated and forced back into port for the rest of the war.

Kellintil watched as ships full of her family, both distant and close relatives, were shattered and sent drifting below the waves of the Sea of Scales, to meet the long extinct Lamia that had given the waters their name during the Sundering. Fingers numb, she let go of the spyglass, the Captain barely catching it in time as she fell to her knees and wailed in sorrow and horror.

Battlegrounds existed both without Noctus and within. The Constantus manor had devolved into a kind of combat that flowed back and forth through the hallways as two women demanded answers of the youngest of their trio. Time and again, Aurelia retreated, having no good response, frequently letting Andolius and Daphne run interference.

By the third night, Aurelia donned her armor and left entirely. It did not take long to find what she was looking for by questioning the men of the Nineteenth Legion. Posted in the westernmost of the watch towers on the wall, its foundations descending into the waters of the Sea of Scales, she found Antonius and his spyglass. It was already late into the evening, and dusk was giving way to night, but she could see perfectly well.

Below them smoldered the remains of the Foundry district. It stung Aurelia's strong sense of smell, forcing her up along the wall itself when approaching the tower, unable to handle walking through the remains of the streets. Piles of corpses clinging to each other in their last moments, as much as the acrid bite of the still festering enclaves of Ilian Fire that remained hidden in the ruins, had contributed as much to Aurelia's chosen path.

He was still peering through the spyglass when he greeted her, "Ser Aurelia, I take it you are well?"

“As well as a tumultuous home life will allow.” She made a face as she approached. The legionaries posted with him nudged each other and murmured before quitting the top of the watch tower, leaving the pair alone.

“I’m sorry for the lack of tranquility...” He put the spyglass down and looked around, confirming their privacy before adding, “Aurelia.” He did not add any honorifics this time.

“Truly, it’s not your fault, it’s my own glib tongue.” Aurelia grimaced, wanting anything to undo what she had said and return to the gentle encounter she had been having with her sister.

“I’ve said more than a few things to earn the wrath of my brother, so I understand.” He offered her the spyglass, “I can’t make much out, but it looks like the Armada has arrived. They’ve engaged across open waters, and I watched every sail in the Shadow Fleet unfurl as they all left their docks.”

Taking the glass, Aurelia peered through it. It did help with distance, which benefited her, but she could see clearly through the gloom the shapes of swans and caravels clashing with massed triremes flying the Imperial colors. “You’re right,” she confirmed, “Some of the new designs from Ilium, too. Massive bastards with solid bronze ram prows. Could probably hold a couple hundred marines...”

“Almost certainly do...”

“There,” Aurelia continued to scan, “There’s the ship with Admiral Praefectus Recivius’s flag, so you’re right, the Shadow Fleet is out. That looks to be the swan with the elven flag on the mast... they’re bracketed...” She winced as a quinquereme came in from a flank and smashed headlong into it. Marines swarmed over the elven decks, slaughtering the enemy crew. “Rammed. Boarded. They’ll be scuttled soon enough.”

Antonius blinked out over the dark horizon before holding out a hand for the spyglass, “I’d like to see.”

“I don’t know if you can...” Aurelia returned the contraption to its owner.

Glancing through, Antonius scowled, “I do not see a fraction of that, and explosions at this time of night are dazzling...” He glanced over at Aurelia, “Your eyesight’s as good as a half-blood’s.”

Flush crept into Aurelia’s cheeks as she realized she had forgotten that part of her mask. She gave a wan smile, “Just come from good stock, one supposes.”

It was not the first time Antonius had noticed how good the Knight-Captain’s senses were. He continued to regard her, and as dark as the battle at sea was, the lanterns and torches of the watchtower kept it well lit. “Lady’s Breath, how did I not notice the scars on your ears?”

“By the Hells, this was a mistake...” Aurelia groused and then rummaged in a pouch. She produced his ring and tossed it at his feet, “Just burn the hair. You won’t see me again.”

He scooped up the ring, “Aurelia, wait... please...”

“No, Ser Tribune, please return to your duties...” The Knight-Captain pulled open the trapdoor that led back down into the tower, but Antonius stomped an armored greave down on it, slamming it back shut as the latch was yanked out of the knight’s hand.

“Aurelia, you’re trying to run because what I just guessed is correct, isn’t it?”

She let a growl come out low from her throat, “You tell me, Tribune Antonius, what is it that a simple lyre maker from Ilium could know about a knight from a city across an ocean?”

He sighed, “Don’t lash out, I’m not your foe, Aurelia.”

She placed both hands onto his breastplate and shoved, sending him staggering. Armor clattered as he went backwards into one of the pillars of the tower’s roof. Grabbing the latch of the trapdoor once more, she wrenched it upwards and was halfway through it when she stopped at a shout from him.

“Half-blood!” shouted the Tribune. “Please, Aurelia, don’t make me yell it after you. Just stay and talk.”

Aurelia was very still as she stared at him, at the worried expression on his face. Briefly, she pondered just killing him and shoving his body over the edge. It would vanish into the sea, but it was known she had been with him. Both eyes squeezed shut for a moment as she banished the thought from her mind, knowing it was her mother’s instincts at work. Ascending the pair of steps she had taken down, she shut the trapdoor, then pulled one of the benches the men used to rest upon on top of it, guaranteeing the continued privacy.

“Even if I were to entertain that thought, Tribune, what do you want?”

Moving cautiously, he pulled the strap for his sword up and over his head. He tossed it at Aurelia’s feet as a peace offering, leaving him armed only with a dagger that was more tool than weapon. He settled on the bench she had just moved, adding his weight to its effectiveness.

“I want to talk to you.”

“We were talking, then you made some rather odious observations, and I chose to return your token and leave.”

“Does that aggressiveness normally work when people get too near to figuring it out?” His tone was not accusatory, merely curious.

“I am the daughter of Severan Constantus! Savior of this city, I --!”

He laughed at the bluster, “Aurelia, I never doubted that part at all, actually. Hells, you look just like the portrait and the statue of him in the gallery of the fortress. If your mother was just a half-blood, this wouldn’t even matter, you’d only be a quarter, and count as human. But she isn’t, is she?”

Aurelia realized she was angrier at herself than at him. Twice in so short a span, she had ruined so much of herself with her loose tongue. Too much time letting herself relax without the usual mask in place, and she was letting it fall away when it would hurt her the worst.

She settled onto the bench, feeling utterly exhausted by it all, “So, out with it... are you going to report this, blackmail me, what?”

He shook his head, “Why would I do any of that? I told you already, I don’t care what ears someone watching my back has, and you’ve done that in spades already.” He held up the ring, “And I’d rather this not be returned in anger or under false pretenses.”

“You well and truly don’t care?” She eyed him cautiously.

“I mean, I do care, but more about what it means for you. I’ll swear on Nalandiel above to anyone who listens that you’re completely human, but I know I’m in the minority. You have to spend so much time working to hide, and that just sounds...”

“...exhausting.”

Still holding the ring, he pressed it into the palm of her hand, “Please, take it again. You have had my back, we have spilled blood together, and I am not so swayed by the Basilica to think there is anything wrong with the blood in your veins. This is my promise to maintain my silence.”

Squeezing the ring tightly in her gauntleted hand, she met his gaze. She found no guile there, only a mix of worry and hope as he regarded her. “Why, Antony? You owe me nothing.”

“No more than any man or woman that has fought at my side, bled on the same cobbles.” He then let that cocksure grin return to his features, “Maybe it’s just because I like you. Or fancy the shape of your face. Or any number of things... maybe I just want to see what you look like in a dress one day.”

Aurelia snorted at the last, “Now wouldn’t that be a sight.”

“Please, you’re beautiful, and I imagine a life of vigor has left you very shapely under that pile of armor.”

“We’re back to being bold now, are we, Antony?”

He let the grin grow broader, “I thought we had reached the point where we were honest with each other. Some truths are pleasant to impart.”

“Most aren’t, though, like how my mother...” She signed, and her head tilted back so she could see the roof. “...annoys the Hells out of me on the regular. Lady’s Breath, she is an unceasing liar, but pounces on even the faintest hint of falseness that I mutter.”

“Oh, I see, one of those types of parents... a hypocrite.”

“Yes!”

“It sounds like she’s still around. I imagine she has a... long life span?”

Aurelia eyed him, “I am not going to say it directly, but you already know the truth.” She then grunted, “But yes, she’s like a bad copper. Can’t get rid of her.”

He chuckled, “There is very little that can irritate us quite like family.” Sobering, he then asked, “But at the end of the day, she’s your mother, you do love her, right?”

That gave Aurelia pause. Considering, she had to acknowledge what she had said to Malindria was truth. She had kept her mother prisoner so long simply because she did not want to let her go, to have some vestige of family again. After letting her out, at least until the slip of her tongue, had been a matron far warmer and more caring than Aurelia had even let herself dream about before. Of course, her only other example of matronly affection was Julia, so that was a relatively low hurdle to overcome in terms of quality.

“Calumnia take her soul, but yes, I do,” admitted the half-blooded knight.

“Truly, only family can get one to curse them to the depths while also proclaiming our affection.” His grin was broad as his tone showed he was clearly teasing.

She shoved lightly at his shoulder, “Oh, hush. You have a father and a brother, at least. I am certain they’ve found one of your very last nerves and played it like a lyre.”

He rocked to one side, then back, little force behind the shove. “Gods above, yes.”

Chuckling with him for a moment, she let silence take over, and the two just sat, comfortable with the distant flashes of the naval battle. Low thunder boomed as the guns of the Black Fortress aided the Imperial Armada in the attempt to break the Coalition’s blockade of the city. That went on for some time before Aurelia asked, “Antony, where do you see this going?”

“What thing? Us?”

“Aye.”

“Where do you want it to go, Relly?”

She fidgeted, then set aside the mask to speak plainly, “There’ve been precious few moments in my life where I imagine there is a point I find happiness. This damn war keeps me trapped in the immediate. You ask me to dream, and it terrifies me.”

“Truly, that is not something that I want. What baffles me most is Aurelia Constantus, hero of the Trade Gate, Theonar’s Bane, is scared of *anything* at all.”

A bark of a laugh came from her, “Tony, I feel like I’m constantly afraid. Of discovery, of failing my father, of letting this city be overrun.” She threw her hands up in the air, “Of everything! The noble Knight-Captain, this hero you speak of? I’ve never met her. There’s just this false face I walk around in.”

“Pfft. You should know better than anyone, courage isn’t not having fear; it’s being able to overcome it when you have to.” He gave another toothy grin, “I’ve been on too many battlefields half ready to piss myself, but somehow gotten through to the other side to believe any different.”

“So, would you call this brave?” She leaned in and kissed him then, lips covering his own. Both of his eyes went wide, but he did not pull away. Instead, he pushed in towards her, and the two deepened the kiss as mouths opened and the pair explored.

When she pulled away, it was Aurelia who was smiling at him, stealing his usual cocksure grin for herself.

He blinked a handful of times, then told her, “I think that was quite courageous. Is this what you want of us?”

“It is, but you must know, fidelity is of keen importance for me.”

“For obvious reasons. You have my word, on Nalandiel above, even if we do not finish the courtship, my silence is permanent.”

She stole another kiss from him for his promise, letting that one linger, too, before pulling away. “When this city is no longer under threat, and we can walk it safely with its gates open, I’ll let you meet my mother, the incorrigible blackguard that she is, and maybe you’ll understand me even better.”

“I look forward to that day, Relly, and any day I get to see you.”

Before she left him, she took her gauntlet off and slid his ring onto a finger and not a pouch, letting him know it would stay with her.

“Mother!”

Aurelia called out for Lilandria as she returned to the manor, still in her armor. Remaining buoyed by the good mood of her conversation with Antony, she decided to end the war in her own home.

“I know where she is, should I fetch her?” Daphne asked, halfway through helping Aurelia out of her armor.

“No, just tell me, and I’ll find her.”

“Your father’s study,” the blonde half-blood informed as she finished the unarming of her mistress. Once Aurelia’s customary nightshirt was on over her small clothes, the two exchanged kisses on each other’s cheeks, then Aurelia strode the house in search of her parent.

“Find my sister, send her there, too, please,” Aurelia asked and was rewarded with a nod before Daphne skipped off deeper into the manor.

True to Daphne’s word, Lilandria was in the study. She had the compendium of Iolias’s adventures out on Severan’s desk and was reading through the scroll.

“I assume you heard me,” Aurelia’s tone was dry as she perched on the edge of the desk.

“Of course I did. Did he read this to you?”

“He did, yes, and I read it myself many times after.” She raised a brow, trying to discern her mother’s line of questioning.

“Good. I made sure he got the correct version of the Tales, not the one the Imperials push on their children. This one has Iolias use his brains, his wit, and not just sleep with every female or kill every male on his way home.”

Aurelia regarded the scroll curiously, “As you said, in this version Iolias remains true to his wife until the end, when he gets home. Lily, what point are you getting at?”

She sighed, “That I didn’t listen to my own advice. My own infidelity has lent me more troubles than I like to admit.” Looking up at her daughter, “I take it you’re still not telling us anything about why Galandir soon won’t be safe?”

Malandria crept through the doorway as her mother asked. Seeing both other women within, she stepped more boldly and delivered a scowl to Aurelia. “I’m still not talking to you until you’re honest.”

That caused Aurelia to sigh, “I plan on being honest.” She then eyed her mother, “But I wanted to ask honesty in return for it, and I think Lily owes us a part of the truth still. Here’s the deal; I’ll tell you both everything, but first

Lily has to tell me why she left father and I, and also why she left Rotheran and you, Mal, to return to me.”

“That’s highly transactional,” accused Lily.

“Says the spy who fucked her mark,” pointed out Aurelia. “Your lies have gotten you here, but truth will get you out of it. Tell me everything, Lily, then let’s stop being enemies.”

“Mother,” Mal interrupted, “I would like to know. It’s a small price, and you’d have to admit it all eventually anyway. Let truth blossom within the light of the Lady and Her beloved Son, and all may be forgiven.”

Lilandria scowled at her elven daughter, “Now you’re just quoting scripture at me.”

“I *am* a paladin, Mother.”

Cornered by both her daughters once more, Lilandria let her fingers trace over Severan’s desk. “Calthus was always handy. He got the stain out that was right here...”

“Addy, why is there a severed head on my desk?”

Lilandria, still known as Adelaide, giggled as she spun the head of a dead half-blood in circles on her lover’s desk. “My new handler decided to ask me to do something I didn’t want to do. So, I did it to him instead.”

“They’re going to get suspicious if you kill them. Better to let them be hung as spies by the Blackshields,” Severan rumbled. It was the pooling mess that seemed to annoy him the most.

Sliding along the edge of the desk, Lily settled into her lover’s lap, straddling him. “He asked me to kill you, Sev. That is not happening.”

He wrapped her up with his thick arms and stole kisses from her lips, “Then I am lucky to have such a beautiful bodyguard, but did he say *why* I need to die?”

“Of course. I... persuaded him... for a few hours to give me everything he knew before I made you your present.” She nipped at his neck and earlobe with her teeth playfully, then told him, “The High King’s been getting superstitious in his old age. Keeps getting readings from charlatans and soothsayers that say a great Imperial hero will lead to his demise. He thinks it’s you.”

Severan snorted at that, “You and I both know Theonar doesn’t have the wit to buckle a belt, let alone interpret a vision correctly.”

Lily giggled at the implication, “Maybe it was another Constantus he has to fear. Even an old elf will still live for a long time.”

Rising, Severan chuckled and easily picked up Lily to place her on the edge of the desk. She wrapped her legs around his waist as he stood in front of her, “I don’t think little Relly will be menacing him anytime soon. She’s currently working on which of her toys she likes gumming the most.”

“Our little Nala will be fierce beyond measure, mark my words.”

“Of that, I have no doubt, beloved.” His lips covered hers as he started to peel her tunic up and off her.

“Every time that I hear that level of infatuation in your voice, Mother, my stomach roils,” complained Malindria.

“Hey, that’s my father, too. That makes it doubly worse for me,” chorused Aurelia.

“You both wanted the truth! You think we didn’t do things that partners do with each other?” Lily gave them both an exasperated look, then explained,

“That was just the first time they asked me to kill him. The Kingdom became insistent as time went on.”

“We just come through the servant’s quarters here...”

Lilandria led the elven assassin through the back route into the Constantus manor. None of the usual servants or half-bloods were present as the infiltrator did as her handler had asked. Darkly cloaked, with the handles of blades protruding from any number of belts and loops, the small wood elf looked every bit the stereotype.

It was not someone Lily knew personally, only by reputation, and they had slit a great many throats that had threatened the kingdom before. Orcs in one campaign, Stunties in another, and now Imperials were the target.

“Thank you, Caulithil, you’ve done the nation a great service...”

The hollow platitude was cut short as the door they were at opened on its own. There stood Severan Constantus in full armor with his gold cloak trailing behind him. Defiance gleamed in his right hand. He jammed it through the assassin’s middle without hesitation. To ensure the deed was complete, Lily unsheathed her own dagger and stabbed it through two of the man’s lower vertebrae. There was only a faint gurgle before he folded like laundry and was still.

“I see you received my note, husband.”

“I did, beloved.” Severan wiped his longsword’s blade on the cloak of the dead man before them. “This one actually got into the house.”

“I didn’t have much warning,” scowled Lilandria before delivering a swift kick to the corpse in frustration.

“This is only going to continue. Orders that you’ve had to lose, two assassins over the course of a year... Theonar’s obsession with my family

has to end.” He nudged the corpse with an armored greave before letting it settle back into the growing puddle of blood.

“Perhaps it’s time I went home again. Theonar is a distant cousin. I could try to ingratiate and figure out what the deal is? Maybe stick a blade in one of these goddess-forsaken soothsayers of his.”

That earned a curious look from Severan, “Until now, you’ve simply protected your own. Would you be comfortable turning your coat and being a spy for an empire that would proclaim you a slave?”

“Sev, my beloved, I’d be *your* spy, not this worthless empire’s.” She stepped forward and leaned against his chest. “My allegiance is to you and our daughter. There is nothing else on this world worthy of my attention.”

“I am loathe to be parted from you, especially with a little one still so young.”

“Pfft. She’s weaned and waddling about already.” Patting her lover’s chest in reassurance, “It won’t be long, I promise. Once I can return, I shall.”

“You betrayed the kingdom and the High King, mother!” accused Lily’s full-blooded daughter.

“Yes, well,” Lily remarked as she rummaged through Severan’s desk. “Once you know more about your cousin, you’ll understand why he wasn’t worth holding any loyalty to in the first place. A-hah!”

Aurelia made a face, “That I’m still distant relations to the High King makes me feel sick.”

Malindria gave a wry laugh, “All the High Elven families are related to each other in some way. Him not being thinly related to you would be the surprise, not the other way around. Family is *supposed* to be everything to

an elf, as that is what will follow us through the centuries.” That last statement was accompanied by a dark look at her mother.

Lilandria unfurled the scroll she had found buried deep within the desk. “This is how I spoke to your father, Relly. I had to destroy my copy of it, but it’s the same magic that the fleet uses to speak to those on the shore. Instead of hearing a voice, we wrote to each other for years.”

Down the length of the scroll were years’ worth of missives and notes from Lilandria to her Imperial lover. Details, numbers, troop counts. Dates were included throughout, and the account went right up until the day of the Battle of the Great Breach. After that, the missives were addressed to Aurelia, begging her to write back, proclaiming mourning for a fallen father, then one last missive that said simply ‘I love you, Aurelia,’ then nothing.

Both of the younger women peered over it, quickly scanning and skimming to understand what they were seeing. The conversation was entirely one-sided; whatever had been sent by Severan was no longer visible.

“Mother, these… this information, you were telling Severan Constantus everything he needed to hold off the Coalition. For years!” Malindria’s eyes were wide as she realized how utterly her mother had betrayed their shared nation.

“Of course I did! I had a husband and a daughter hidden within the city’s walls! Letting it fall would be gambling with their lives! The last thing I expected was to get stuck on the other side of a siege line! I had always planned on returning to Noctus, so I took advantage of ingratiating myself back into the kingdom!”

“Elves, Ghontish, and so many others died for the sake of your affair!”

“And I would trade their lives a dozen times over again for my family!” shouted their matron from beneath a pair of glowering brows, “You have always been too idealistic. That’s your father’s lies about how this world can be sorted so neatly giving foundation to your words.”

As Malindria stared at her parent in horror, it was Aurelia who was wiping at her eyes with her sleeve. “I never knew about this. It has sat and rotted in his desk since... since... that day.”

Ignoring Malindria’s rage, Lily offered her younger daughter a soft smile, “I know. I always assumed he had hidden it away so thoroughly you just never found it... or that bitch Julia burned it.” Rolling it back up, she extended the scroll to Aurelia, “There, proof you can use to destroy me. My pledge to you, Relly, that I have always loved you.”

Mal’s voice was full of bitterness as she spoke, “Wonderful, mother, I am so happy for you. How could you be ready to discard everything else in your life so completely for... for... a Calumnia-damned mayfly!”

“That’s my father!” snapped Aurelia.

Paling, Mal turned to Aurelia, “I-I am sorry, I spoke out of turn, I...” Pointing at Lilandria, “Explain, mother! Lady above, please!”

Lilandria pinched the bridge of her nose, “Fine. The salient points, then.”

“Then it’s settled. Peace,” Severan Constantus rumbled, a smile broadly displayed on his features. He had worn his battered and scarred armor as First Knight to the negotiations, but also bore his rod of office as Proconsul. It was making the point that he was as much warrior as statesman.

The elven ambassador bowed across the table, “Such as it is. We have the word of the Empire that the Toll is abolished for all time?” Other ambassadors, representing each of the other Coalition nations added their own bows.

“In the form it is, yes. We will charge coin, as is the privilege for maintaining the Strait free from piracy and neutral to all other nations.” Confirmed the Proconsul.

“But of course. The Treaty Lands shall be returned to Imperial administration as well.” The elf’s smile was broad, a feather in his cap as a negotiator. He then offered another bow, “And to the giants of Dun Moroch, their wisdom and fidelity is as legendary as ever. Thank you to His Highness, King Abelard ap Cralloch.”

An ancient giant pushed to his feet, his tartan beautifully stitched, trimmed in gold, and with brooches of multifaceted gemstones. Deeper even than Severan’s baritone, his voice was the rumble of old granite grinding together, “It is our honor and our duty to aid the younger races. Peace and an end to bondage on this continent. This is the commandment of our father Thumnir.”

The giants had never worshipped the Lady Ilia, but their father Thumnir, oft regarded as one of the leaders of the rebellion of the gods. In their preaching and holy texts, they always claimed that He had only sought freedom from a tyrannical god, and even if the rebellion had failed, the Lady Ilia had softened Her own rule in acknowledgment of Thumnir’s complaints. His children had long sought to illustrate their wisdom to the other races to redeem their divine father’s reputation.

“Well, let us sign –” the elven ambassador started to open the ledger that had the official peace treaties within, to be signed by each of the representatives of their nations.

The great doors of the giantish hall opened, interrupting the ambassador. An entire procession of elves forced their way in. At its head was High King Theonar Hathilan, third of his name. Wrapped in the ceremonial mithril plate he wore as both High King and the ostensible head of the Order of the Lady’s Guard, his ermine cloak flowed behind him as he quickly strode across the hall.

“This charade is over,” declared the High King in Hilumani, not bothering to speak a tongue such as Ghontish or Imperial that everyone in the room would know. Translators whispered rapidly into the ears of the ambassadors.

“Y-y-your highness!” stammered the elven ambassador, startled by the sudden intrusion.

“What is the meaning of this, Theonar?” Severan did not need a translator, nor did he bother swapping out of his native Imperial tongue. “We were about to sign and end this foolish affair.”

“If you want peace, Imperial lackey, you must agree to all of the demands that have been put before your Calumnia venerating empire!” The High King’s voice was a reedy screech as he pointed at Severan.

Behind the High King milled a panoply of hangers on and immediate vassals. Among them was Rotheran Caulithil and the man’s wife. Embarrassment radiated from her as she quietly gave Severan an apologetic look even while hanging from the arm of the man whose wedding band she wore.

“Theonar,” rumbled the giantish king, using the familiar as a monarch of equal standing, “This was not necessary, and you allowed us to proceed with mediation in good faith. Evacuating their city, demanding an empire across an ocean change its internal laws is not reasonable, but their counter proposal was...”

Theonar’s voice grew ever more shrill as he ranted, “I was a fool to think any of Thumnir’s children could understand the grave injustice caused by Noctus even existing! It was conquered in my own lifetime! I remember the villages that used to be there.”

Severan rolled his eyes, “Of course, you’re old enough that even as an elf, senility might be settling in. Perhaps you should go home, Theonar, and let those who care about your people continue forward. Don’t you have some regiments of paladins you can parade around your palace to keep you busy?”

Several of the ambassadors laughed, forgetting decorum. The Dwarven one, especially, was chucking into his beard and elbowing the Gnomish representative who sat next to him.

That left the High King to seethe, not missing the blatant insult laid out before him, “You will hand over the city to the Kingdom of Galandir! Its population, in its entirety, will return to that hellscape of a continent your empire is from, and you will confirm that all bondage will be immediately ended, or this war shall be continued until Galandir soldiers occupy Ilium itself! Those are the demands for peace!”

“Then I look forward to killing as many of your men as I can,” Severan’s voice was a low growl as he looked to the Imperial delegation and made a quick motion. As one, they turned on their heels and marched away from the negotiating table.

“Theonar Hathilan,” snarled the giantish king, “You are a bloody fool. You have destroyed months of work and a chance at ending the bondage you claim to despise within your own lifetime by poisoning its roots! For what? Pride!”

It was too late, by then, as the Imperials had already stormed clear of the room, the entire delegation flowing behind their Proconsul like piranha in water. Legates, Knights of multiple Imperial orders, and toga-wearing dignitaries all trailed behind their Great Man, unwilling to accede to the elven monarch’s slight. The rest of the chamber devolved into recrimination and shouts, even the Ghontish ambassador leveling several pointed remarks at Theonar and his advisors. Bearded short folk, Dwarves and Gnomes alike, were furious. There was no profit in continuing the war, they had already determined, and only treaties had kept them tethered to the cause thus far. It was a fair deal, the Dwarven ambassador, Heir to the Throne of Undermountain, shouted at Theonar. They fought well and deserve their negotiated settlement, was his reasoning.

Nothing moved Theonar. Treaties and honor kept the Coalition tied together, barely, in the days that would come. A promise to finish the war, to stop the bleeding on all sides, would be made and culminate in the Battle of the Great Breach, when Theonar gambled and lost that he could take the city in a single, decisive blow.

Severan was still packing his traveling trunk when Lilandria found him. Having slipped away from her husband, she had switched to the leathers and cloak of her profession. She tapped a piece of furniture within the ambassadorial suite to let him know she was there.

“A little more warning would’ve been nice,” groused Severan.

“He played along and made it seem like he’d take the deal right up until everyone was shoved into the carriages and we were moving. After that, my husband was with me the whole time, and I couldn’t write. The bastard was lying from the start.” Deep annoyance echoed in Lily’s tone.

Shoving some of the clothing into his baggage, Severan turned to regard his lover, “Have you been laying with him?”

“Of course I have, he’s my husband, it’d be odd if I didn’t.”

“How much does he know about your time with me?” Severan crossed the room and got his arms around his elven paramour’s waist, tugging her close.

She melted into him, their first contact in years. “He knows I slept with you, it’d be stupid to hide that from him. I lie by omission about who your daughter’s mother is, as I suspect he already figured that one out. He’s not stupid, just utterly loyal to Theonar, and both of them hate you.”

“There’s a thin line between those two qualities,” joked Severan.

That made Lily giggle, “True enough.” She paused, looked around, then told Severan, “We have little enough time, but I still want that sibling for Nala. Please? While we can?”

“Only because you ask so nicely, beloved.”

He carried her over to the bed and laid her out upon it.

“Okay, the rest I can live without,” Aurelia still felt queasy when her mother started getting so happy with giving up intimate details of her parents’ encounters. “So, he did know your real name?”

“Yes, of course he did. I don’t think I ever actually told it to him, but he certainly knew it. Especially after that night.” Lilandria shrugged, “But that’s not really the important part. Theonar killed the negotiations because he’d received another reading that a Constantus would kill him.”

Aurelia growled, “Well, at this point, I’m perfectly willing to give it a try.”

“Lady’s Breath, no wonder father was so furious at you after that trip to the giant’s home,” Mal observed softly. “Didn’t he have...”

“... me tailed constantly afterwards? Yes. He smelled what Severan and I had done on my clothes and went into a rage. That’s why it took so long to finally get back to Noctus. It took a decade and a half before he felt I could be trusted enough, and by that point he’d conspired to have my beloved murdered by his men.”

“And the moment he somewhat forgave you, you bolted,” concluded Malindria.

“But if the High King wants any and all Constantus dead, why would you think I could go home with you to Galandir?”

“Because I planned on killing the king once I got you home,” Lilandria gave her daughter the widest smile, as if it were the most natural idea in the world.

“Mother!” gasped Malindria.

“Oh, hush, I’ve given away enough at this point, you know my single motivator in all things is my children. If he threatens Relly, which he does, the only option is to gut the bastard.”

Aurelia had to give a soft chuckle, “You really, really loved him, didn’t you?”

“I swear to the Lady above and Her Son, that yes, Severan Constantus was the man I loved more than I have loved any others in my life combined. Centuries from now, I will weep over the time I lost with him due to that fool, Theonar, and that bastard, Rotheran. That Rotheran brought your sister anywhere near Noctus has me even more cross with him than I was. Good thing he’s already dead.”

“Mother, every time you say something like that, it’s a knife to my own heart,” Mal admitted.

“I know, beloved,” Lily turned to regard her full-blooded child, “I do not transfer any of my contempt towards my husband to you or your brothers. I would both kill or die for you all. Your brothers are a lot more independent, so it is you I worry about nearly as much as my dear Nala.”

“Aurelia, Lily, I’m not comfortable with that other name,” warned the half-blood daughter.

“Sorry, I... Aurelia it is.” Lily took a breath, “Not only was it the leash being slipped that made me come back, but it was what I was hearing within the court. Theonar was getting more readings that a Constantus would still kill him, and well... there was only one left. Then he was negotiating with the giants, even as the dwarves were wavering in their commitment. The rest, you know.”

Taking a breath, Aurelia started, “Lily, about the cage I put you in...”

“Yes?”

“Looking back, I think it was damn funny.”

“Oh, hah hah.”

Malindria giggled, “I saw the cage. That must’ve been uncomfortable for the greatest spy of elvendom.”

Lilandria rolled her eyes, “This is what I have to look forward to? My daughters allying and striking out against me?”

“Lady’s Breath, I hope so,” smiled Aurelia, “You certainly have earned it. Unfaithful, murdering liar that you are... you are still our mother, so I guess we’re reduced to mocking you to keep your ego in check moving forward.”

Malindria sighed, “I certainly don’t forgive you, not yet, but I ... don’t hate you. I can understand why you did some of what you did, but not all. Give me time, Mother.” She looked to Aurelia, “It’s your turn to be truthful, now.”

“It is, I admit. It is the deal I struck, after all, and I will keep to that oath, because I’m not some goddess-forsaken liar, like most paladins I’ve met.” She stuck her tongue out briefly at Malindria, and the teasing tone was clear.

Aurelia settled back in the seat she had chosen and told them both. First, everything about Antonius, which seemed to please Malindria thoroughly. Then came what she had learned about the war. The arrival of the armada and how, soon enough, six new legions of troops would land and sweep aside the Coalition armies with the goal of marching on the Ivory City itself.

That pleased neither of them.

Chapter 10

Breakout

They will be the shield of our republic! Our legions will defeat the treasonous children of Thumnir at our gates and drive them back. This entire continent will belong to humanity! – First Consul Tiberius Nilonius, reforming Republic into Empire, creating the legions.

“Heave! Ho! Heave! Ho!”

Marines and sailors of the Imperial fleet worked in teams to haul the vast galleys required to transport entire legions and their equipment across an ocean. Each of the lumbering beasts had been driven ashore, their keels designed for the abuse, and their slave-sailors worked with vast ropes to drag them from the surf. Those already pulled upon the sandy surfaces of the beaches far to the west of the Coalition Camp’s lines were extending huge gangplanks as both men and horses were led down in maniples and squadrons.

Each legion had its own colors. Like the red of the Second and the black of the Nineteenth, a rainbow of armed soldiery had begun to array. Green for the Third, Blue for the Fourth, Orange for the Fifth, and on and on. They all bore an Imperial eagle upon their Legion’s banner, their legion’s number made obvious by how many images of the Lady’s blade were on each of

their banners. The Nineteenth had to arrange theirs in several blocks of five due to the sheer number, and it still made their banner look cluttered.

Between the two legions already in Noctus and the six that were beginning to disembark, eight of the Empire's nineteen legions had been committed to the war. No action had seen such vast numbers of Imperial soldiery since the final campaigns of the unification wars, when fifteen legions bore down on the homelands of the Ghontish tribes of the eastern continent's north, and defeated them so utterly that they fled entirely to found a new nation.

Knights of the largest of the Calestan orders walked among them. Mirrors to the Order of Saint Sanguis, the enamel of the plate matched their order, much akin to how the legionaries dyed their tunics, banners, and bristles to match their legion. Dark blue steel of the Order of Saint Invisus glinted in the morning sun, the knights keeping a wary watch on the beachhead as the bulk of the army disembarked. Slaughterers of slave uprisings and orcs alike, none of them had known gentlemanly battle, as the only way to measure victory on Calexis was the depth of ruthlessness displayed.

It would take two to three days at the most for the army to disembark. Nearly forty thousand Imperial legionaries would march to engage the enemy army. When the garrison at Noctus sallied out to meet their fellows, the Coalition would be flanked, and their line of retreat to Galandir and Tor Ghontir cut off.

Disaster loomed, and once the last vestiges of the Coalition's military were swept away, the path to the Ivory City would lie open. More wealth and slaves than the Empire had reaped in generations.

The legionaries knew it too; each Legate had promised them a share. Men and women who had cut their teeth on suppressing slave revolts and fighting Orc tribesmen, something that offered little recompense aside from a monthly salary, suddenly had their eyes and their hearts filled with the dreams of rivers of gold, soft lives, and warm elven companionship. A chest of gold and a soft, warm elf or half-blood for every bed were the lies that had been sown.

There would be no mercy when wealth and plunder awaited.

Malindria found her mother at the portrait of Severan Constantus. Aurelia was beside herself with what she had just given away, betrayed of her own nation, so it had fallen on Mal to talk to her mother and figure out what to do next.

“You can see where she rubs his picture here...” Lily traced a line of wear along the teak wood frame, where all the stain had worn away to give way to the original color of the grain. Looking up at the handsome, regal features of the man she had loved, the elder Caulithil sighed, “Look at him, can you blame me?”

“I don’t have much practice with boys, Mother,” Mal spoke quietly, but did look up and regard the man. He did look handsome in his spit-polished black plate, a gold cloak, and a roguish smile. “But... he is striking for a male, especially for a human. I see where Aurelia gets her looks.”

“As soon as she started showing red fuzz on her head, I knew she’d look just like him.”

“Why didn’t you run?”

Lily tilted her head as she regarded her daughter. “What do you mean?”

“I saw the kennel. You’ve picked harder locks with a hair pin before. I’ve seen you do it when you wanted to get at something of Father’s. You stayed, though, waited here in Noctus. Why?”

“Those manacles weren’t coming off without the release command, love, you saw that yourself.” Lily broadened her smile, making no effort to cleanly answer the question.

Mal huffed, “Lady’s Breath, Mother, now I can see it every time you open your mouth. It’s how free you are with these lies that tears me up. I thought

I, at least, would be immune to some of that. I do not believe, for a moment, given time and real effort, you wouldn't have figured out the name of your own daughter as one of the words your true husband would use to craft those manacles. Are you this master of espionage as you always led me to believe, or is this another falsehood?"

Trapped between her ego and the truth, Lily relented a little, "Fine. The manacles would've been a problem, but I certainly left that cage plenty. I snuck food from the kitchen all the time, then went back. I even slipped out for some air a few times but returned swiftly."

Mal's gaze narrowed as some of the truth came out, "Then what was the purpose of the whole charade? Did you not want to come home?"

Lily paced, making a frustrated noise, "Of course I wanted to return to you and the boys. I wasn't even all that mad at Rotheran at that very moment, but I wanted to give Relly time. Yes, I admit I got... a little volatile..."

"Angry."

"Yes, alright! I got pissed off it was taking her so long and maybe said... a number of stupid, hurtful things, but it was all in the service of letting her have the time she needed to come around."

Mal covered her face with her hands, "So you screamed and yelled at her, I assume, and that just made her dig in her heels."

"I, um, when you put it that way, it does not sound like the greatest idea on my part."

"Mother!"

Another false smile graced Lily's features, "It turned out well, though! Look, patience as a virtue won out, and it prompted your sister to reunite us. This is the closest we've yet been to reconciling..."

Mal scowled, jabbing her mother's shoulder with a finger in accusation, "I wouldn't even be here, in this city, if you hadn't sat in that kennel for a year waiting for Aurelia to have a revelation while you treated her like she

remembered her step-mother doing! You just made it worse and sat there like a target she could funnel her rage at!"

Offense tinged Lily's voice, "Wait a moment, don't compare me to that woman..."

"You're right, I shouldn't. Lilandria Caulithil, *you're* the one that's old enough to know better than to be like that. All those motherly bits of advice you gave me over the years... kindness, courtesy, patience, did you just mimic those from somewhere?"

Her mother's features had settled into a deep scowl before she admitted, "... I bought a book, before the boys were born. It had a lot of useful sayings and idioms in it. They seemed to turn out well, so I... just re-used it when you were born later." There was a moment's pause, and without prompting, Lily added, "It may be why you turned out a touch naïve..."

Malindria stared, dumbfounded, at her parent.

"Um. Did you want to read it? I could give it to you once we're home. Maybe you could use it when you and Kell decide ..." She was partway through the offer when Mal cut back in, roused from being stunned by her mother's admission.

"No, I do not want your Goddess-forsaken baby advice book!" Both hands were thrown in the air, and it was the younger elf's turn to pace as she ran a hand over her hair.

Fidgeting for a moment, Lily gave in to reality. "No, likely not. It'd still give you better advice about parenting than I ever could, but it's just a book."

"Finally, some honesty, even if it's a fraction of the whole that is owed."

Lily sighed, "I take it you wanted to talk about more than how shit of a parent I am? More likely about the information we've been given about how the Coalition's about to be annihilated by half the Imperial army?"

Mal gave a wan smile, "Mother, we need to do something."

“I know. Is it wrong I don’t want to? To just leave Theonar to hang?”

“It is wrong, Mother.”

Lilandria sighed, then tiptoed up to kiss the old portrait as high up as she could make it, about midway up Severan’s chest. Patting the spot she had kissed, she murmured, “I love you,” in clear Imperial, after having been speaking with her daughter in Hilumani. Turning to Mal, she said, “With all that’s happened, both between myself and Aurelia and myself and you, you think me a villain.”

“You’re a murderer, a liar, and you betrayed the kingdom for a man. Yes, Mother, you are a villain.” Reaching out, she took Lily’s hands, “These are stained with so much blood, but you can help redeem that a little. I am no infiltrator, I am under no illusion I could safely get away from this city, and we likely couldn’t drag my sister away with all the chains in Noctus.”

Lily yanked her hands away, “I did all this for your sister!”

“You did all this for yourself, Mother!” shouted Mal through the obvious lie, “Everything you’ve told us has been replete with the self-satisfied allure of someone who liked getting away with whatever they wanted. You are a selfish brat, and I cannot believe I have not understood that until now. I am not even sure if your love of your children is a redeeming quality; it cries out that you have marked us as yours, and you cannot handle having what is yours stolen or broken!”

Lily snarled at her elven daughter, “You think so little of me, yet speak to me like that. If I am some cruel blackguard like you declare, why aren’t you afraid of the assassin you see?”

Taking a breath, Malindria held her ground, “Because, you’re still my mother, and I do, at the end of things, still love you dearly. I want you to take an opportunity to redeem yourself, not because I’ve demanded it, but because you want to be better than all these things you’ve shown me you are. I want for you to want to be better.”

Lily rubbed at her face, the venom gone, “Lady’s Breath, an effort to rescue one errant child may end in losing both.”

“It doesn’t have to. This can still have that happy ending, like lolias, regardless of the tragedy we navigate along the path.”

Scoffing, and looking away from her daughter, Lily asked, “Even if I snuck out there, warned the Coalition, do you think I have any credibility left? Rotheran surely...”

“If he did, he didn’t tell me or anyone else. I don’t know if maybe he loved you still, in a way, or he was ashamed or what... but I don’t think it’s known what you’ve done.”

Lily hmmed and glanced back up at Severan’s huge portrait. “We were happy, your father and I, a long time ago. Maybe he didn’t forget that. Some of the old romantic left in him that led him to be a paladin in the first place.”

“Each time he mentioned you, it was always about rescuing you from within the city. Saving you from Noctus and possible bondage. There was never talk about revenge or getting back at you or... or anything else awful.” Mal reached out and gently tugged at her mother’s arm to turn her back around, “Mother... I... Mama, please, we need you. I need you.”

A soft, sad smile shaped Lilandria’s features. She cupped her daughter’s cheek, “What gives me the most pride in you is that, knowing what I know about myself, you still care more about others than just about anyone I’ve ever met.”

“Thanks, I think. Don’t think some self-deprecation earns forgiveness...” She matched her mother’s smile, “It just makes you more endearing.”

“I’ll take what I can get, dearest fawn,” Lily wrapped both arms around her daughter and hugged tightly, “I’ll slip out and see what I can do. I’ll need help from your sister to get away cleanly, I suspect.”

Mal squeezed back, “Thank you, Mama, you’re doing the right thing.”

“I’ll try to find Kell, too, and let her know you’re alive and not to despair.”

“This isn’t how I expected to meet your mother.”

Aurelia scowled at the Tribune, who had commandeered the westernmost watchtower of the wall once more. The Knight-Captain had made sure to let it slip that she was expecting to have a tryst with her fellow officer, and then handed out enough silver coins to get the Blackshields and Legionaries assigned more interested in emptying the kegs of the nearest tavern than staying behind. They all assumed the tower would be safe with a Tribune and a Knight-Captain contained within.

“Rather glib for an Imperial, isn’t he?” Lilandria’s accent sounded straight from the Half-Blood quarter, instead of the usual posh tones of the Galand countryside that her voice naturally sounded like.

“Been like that since I met him,” explained Aurelia, truthfully enough. She did not wear her armor, but a doublet with her father’s crest on the breast and trousers.

Antonius pinched the bridge of his nose beneath his helm, “Okay, explain to me why I have you both out here, then? Just the other day, Aurelia, you were skittish as a cat even having your secrets hinted at, now you’re parading them about...”

“She’s not parading me anywhere.” To her credit, Lilandria could easily blend in as a bondsman on a night as dark as the current one. The makeup and concealer made her ears look significantly smaller. She wore a borrowed tunic and belt and had a hooded cloak that she did a remarkably good job of hiding within. “I’m Daphne, her bondswoman.”

“Please trust me, Antony, what we are planning is in the service of saving lives and being true to the tenets of Nalandiel himself. Protect and defend, the same role as a legionary.” Aurelia tried pleading with the man.

“Be honest with me, then, Aurelia. You trusted me once, it worked out well enough...” He extended an open hand, a gesture to show he meant what he said.

Silence weighed heavy in the air, then Aurelia made a decision. Instead of pondering it any longer, she went with her gut instinct, “I’m sending my mother to the Coalition to persuade them to retreat. To go home, which is what I have *always* wanted of them. What everyone in this city has always wanted.”

Antony glanced over at Lily, “Why? Why bother, if she’s about to rappel down the wall to sprint over towards them, I assume you’ve already told her their fate come the next two days.”

“I have.”

Lily was direct, holding the human’s gaze steady, “Look, Tribune Antonius, even if the battle’s a one-sided slaughter, Imperials will still be dying during that fight. We’re preventing their deaths, too. You’ll understand that I am very keen to prevent the Ivory City from getting sacked and used as your proconsul’s path to glory and wealth for herself.”

His teeth ground, “That’s treason then, it really is. You’re asking me to betray my own nation...”

“Our nation!” Aurelia pleaded, “This is about money, raw coin, and riches. To make that money, they are going to ruin lives and murder tens of thousands in a genocide unmatched since the Unification War! Nalandiel did not stand aside when His mother was betrayed, even though those were His siblings He fought, and I can’t do that here! These people do not deserve a dark fate just because Theonar’s a bloody-minded fool!”

“Fuck!” Antony swore and paced around the watch tower. One hand gripped the rod of his office tightly; the other was kept far away from his sword. He pulled his helm off and let it clatter to the floor so he could run his fingers through his dark hair.

Lily nudged her daughter, then nodded to her own belt where Aurelia knew her mother had a dagger sheathed. A dark glare was the answer she received as Aurelia, declined the option to simply murder the man, not that she had not once considered it herself.

That she had, even for a moment, once before made her more determined not to let that happen. “Antony, please, it’s the right thing.”

“I don’t need to be lectured about what the right thing is by a Bloody Saint!” snapped the Tribune.

That gave them both pause, the pair staring at each other. Aurelia kept her hands open and up, showing she was still his ally, but Antony was breathing quicker from the stress and pressure of what was being asked of him. “I know, I’m sorry. Even worse that it’s me, after what happened in the second assault. If you never want to see my face again after this, you won’t. If it is ever discovered, I’ll take the blame, say I ordered you.”

“But you’re right about one thing,” Antony’s voice softened, “The men of the Nineteenth don’t want to march to Galandir, that’s for sure. They’re tired, Relly, bloody tired. They want to put their arms down, muster out for the next generation, go have a family...” He dropped into one of the benches with a clatter of armor.

Lily had remained silent as the two spoke, keeping to the edge of the tower like a ghost. Her face was impassive, but her fingers continued to play along the edge of her cloak like a promise to her daughter.

Aurelia moved to settle onto the bench next to the Tribune, “That’s what I want for them. I don’t give a rat’s ass about how rich we can make some fat butcher from Ilium. This city is what I swore to protect, and that includes its citizens and its soldiers. Let her ram her head into Caer Galand or Caer Aldwell a few times. This deployment is too expensive to maintain. The Senate will yank her leash, and there’ll be a peace treaty. Theonar’s own council is nearly in revolt...” she tilted her head towards her mother, “... at least according to her. Having to retreat means he’ll be forced off the

throne, and his far gentler son will walk back to the peace table. Everyone can finally just fucking go home.”

Antony reached out and let his fingers trail over Aurelia’s cheek. Sighing, they slid away from her as he stood. “Understand what I do, I am doing for my men. So, they’re not dying to let some cruel, callow woman enrich herself.” He looked around, seriousness evaporating as he asked, “I assume you have a way down?”

Lilandria rolled her eyes and produced a rope that had been hiding beneath the cloak, “Of course.” She started tying it to one of the columns of the tower.

Pushing to her own feet, Aurelia approached the Tribune, “Antony, thank you, I...”

“Please, give me a moment to get over wanting to throw up at the moment.” He turned to watch Lily putting the finishing touches on the knot before hurling the full length of the rope out the side of the tower that led out of the city and towards the Coalition lines. Aurelia stood next to him, watching her parent get ready to rappel down and out of the tower.

“Aurelia, Daughter, I...” Lilandria seemed to consider her words a moment before continuing, “... I’ve been a shit mother, but you were born out of love. Stay safe, and if you are willing to allow it, we’ll be reunited. I’d like a chance to try considerably harder.”

“You follow through on what you’ve sworn, and I promise you the chance. In the interim, I will keep your other daughter safe.”

Lilandria let herself smile, “Good, I love you, Relly, I truly do.”

“Then go, and prove that you do, for both myself and my sister.”

No more words were said, as Lily dropped away from the tower, rappelling rapidly down to its base. Once at the base, among the scree and rubble from the foundations, Lilandria scrabbled through the shallow western edges of the ditch that abutted the walls. Once a handful of steps past it,

she was gone, so dark a shadow not even half-blooded senses could spot her.

Antony slid his sword free, not as a threat, but to cut the rope and send it zipping away through the windows of the tower to vanish into the night. Once it was gone, the sword disappeared back into its home. Settling on the bench once more, the Tribune groused, “Some tryst.”

“I’m sorry,” Aurelia said, feeling like it was for the thousandth time already. She sat next to him once more.

“I don’t know what’s worse, that I let that happen, or that I don’t feel particularly bad.”

That caused Aurelia to raise a brow at him, “Don’t feel bad? What was that whole show about, then?”

“I mean, it was still a moral dilemma...”

She rolled her eyes, “You are so full of shit. You were near panicking.”

“Maybe a little. That and the blade under your mother’s cloak wasn’t helping.”

“Oh, you spotted that?”

He nodded, “I did. I take it you’re the reason I didn’t get something jabbed between two vertebrae.”

“I think she trusted me to get through to you, yes, but also has a tendency to stab first, think about consequences as a distant second. As I said, she’s infuriating.”

A cocksure grin found its way onto his features, “Also, a sister? I thought you were an only child?”

“I am my father’s only child. My sister is not my father’s daughter.”

“In short, she’s not a half-blood.”

“Lady’s Breath, no. Paladin that got lost on her way to the war. Luck alone let me find her, realize she looks just like my mother, and then drag her somewhere safe.”

He shrugged, “Maybe not luck at all. Perhaps Nalandiel is guarding your family with His shield. He could have something planned for the lot of you.”

“I hope not. This has been plenty enough excitement. I want this war to end, and I want to rest. I want even a week of my life that belongs to me once more. To live, be with those I care about, and finally rest.”

“Those you care about, like...?”

“My sister. My mother. Oh, my two bondsmen... there’s that nice lady three doors down who has several cats... perhaps my second from the cohort. That one elderly gentleman that said my hair was pretty that one time...”

To his credit, Antony did laugh, “Oh, a jester, I see.”

“Maybe, possibly, this very poorly dressed Tribune that has this awful, awful accent, but I hear his papa makes a decent lyre...”

“Speaking of infuriating women, you, Aurelia Constantus, are definitely very high on that list.”

She grinned at him, “Good. If I’m not getting under your skin, I’m certainly not having the desired effect.” One hand reached out and grabbed the top of his breastplate, pulling him over towards him. “Now, there was this tryst you were promised, and there’s not much time left before your men wonder what’s taking so long.”

“Wait, what, I – ”

Her lips caressed his own for a moment, her fingers followed behind as they stroked along the edges of his hairline and down his cheek. It silenced him, pulling a smirk to her own lips. “Isn’t that what you were waiting for?”

“Temptress! Harlot! Slattern!” The tone of his voice was anything but serious: “Goddess, you’re beautiful.” That was far more sincere as he let his fingertips brush her features in turn.

“I only let my lovers call me that,” she warned softly, tugging and pulling at the buckles and straps of his armor. Legionary armor could be lifted up and off as nearly a single piece once loosened well enough, with only a tunic worn beneath, unlike the encasement of knightly plate.

“Beautiful,” he told her again, unheeding of her warning.

“Now you’ve done it,” She began to push breastplate and pteruges, the studded leather skirt beneath it, up and off him. It tilted and clattered to the side once free, leaving him in just the black tunic of his legion. “If you won’t take that back...”

“... Not in a thousand thousand years.” He cupped her neck, one thumb sliding along the edge of an earlobe, “How could anyone claim your blood is diseased?” His other hand pulled and tugged at the strings of her doublet, letting it widen and reveal the soft flesh of her chest pushed up by the tight confines.

“Fools and idiots,” she breathed, “It’s so fucking exhausting to hide all the time.”

His hand on her neck slid higher. Meeting her gaze, he asked softly, “Can I touch...?”

A bit of lip was worried for a moment, then she nodded her assent. A feather-light touch grazed along the edges of her ear, over the lies that she presented every day. “It’s so well done, you’d never know unless you really looked...”

“I know. One day, maybe, I can have them healed, restored by magic.” Pushing the hand away from her ear, she pulled the doublet up and off, taking the tunic beneath with it.

His breath hitched as he saw her unclothed from the waist up. “Is it blasphemy to compare you to those statues of the Lady the ancients left everywhere?”

Her smirking grin returned, “You’ll give me a complex if you keep the flattery going. Don’t most of those have no arms? I happen to think those are one of my best features...”

His fingers trailed over sculpted shoulders before tracing biceps honed from years of battle and training. “All She wears is a helmet. Sometimes some gossamer...”

Letting herself be admired, something that only a pair of others had ever been allowed to do, Aurelia tugged lightly at the belt that inched his tunic around his waist. It fell away, loosening the fabric to drape freely around him, “You can’t tell if She’s human or elf or something else. All you know is that She is not one of the beast races, a stuntie, or a giant.”

Antony pulled his tunic up and off, tossing it to one side. Following suit, Aurelia removed what protected the few remaining parts of her modesty. He regarded her appreciatively, then asked, “And which are you, Relly? Elf or Man?”

“I’m both,” she admitted with a whisper. “What do you make of that?”

Antony pulled her to him, then showed her exactly what he thought of the matter.

Kellintil had scaled one of the disused trebuchets, quiet since its giantish crew had abandoned the Coalition. She had done so every night since the battle on the Sea of Scales, spyglass clutched to her. Time and again, she surveyed the coastline and waters, looking for something, anything.

Those first pair of nights, she had found floating survivors. Three Marulami sea elves and a Ghontish ensign from a different ship. A handful of skiffs

had collected them. Two of the elves had lived, as had the Ghontish man. What they had described once they could speak was a devastating naval loss.

The small sea elf knew her captain had already been told less than a quarter of both fleets had returned to port. Imperial naval might commanded the strait, brazenly patrolling back and forth. Spindly docks that jutted out of Noctus were packed with fresh ships and supplies.

She did not know why she had stayed. Kellintil had already tried resigning her commission once, and that had not taken. Through some combination of happenstance or luck, they had found Valor happily chewing some grass near the camp. Of Malindria, there was no sign at all. She was simply gone, the scabbard upon Valor's saddle empty as well. Searching the stallion's saddlebags showed little evidence to indicate Kell's love was anything other than a casualty.

Within had been a pocket copy of the Canon of the Son, well-leafed and with Mal's chicken scratch handwriting throughout, a few everyday items a soldier might need, and the lock of powder blue hair that had been bequeathed to Malindria as the token of Kell's love. It was all the sign she needed to think her beloved dead. She wished she could feel some of the placid calm the horse had exuded, the creature having no idea what fate had surely befallen his mistress.

Yet Kellintil stayed, and she could not say why. It would be easy to take Valor and ride. Removing his bardings beforehand would leave the powerful creature fast and agile, able to outrun anyone willing to waste their time going after a single deserter. There had been so many of those lately that the effort to prevent them had all but collapsed.

It had to be hope, Kellintil thought to herself as she peered across still waters rife with the Imperial flotilla. Something told her to hold steadfast, because something was coming. What, she could not say. Certainly, the forces of Noctus would see how depleted and how ruined the morale of the Coalition was and attempt a breakout. There were two legions confirmed to

be within the city already, and all their militias. How many already disembarked into Noctus's docks was anyone's guess.

As her thoughts settled on the City of Chains, her spyglass passed over it. Black walls and their crimson-stained doors held the bonded in as much as it kept the invader out. Above it all loomed the ebon wedge of the Black Fortress, formerly Mount Noct, but hollowed out and repurposed. Its heart had been turned into those walls, its waist and edges pruned off, and its peak removed, but it still loomed over everything.

She scanned back and forth, the spyglass showing her each stone in the wall as clearly as if she were standing in front of them in open sunlight. Impact damage from multiple bombardments pitted the walls up and down their length. The central gate was still a ruined pile of slag and stone, about half the height of the original wall, but still an obstacle with the barricaded inner parkam door beyond it. Where the great breach had been reopened, Imperial magic had closed it, giving it a bizarre, organic look where the basalt had flowed back into place due to the arcane work of the Imperial College.

What gave Kellintil pause was when she reached the western tower. A figure had just started to rappel down and out, on the outer side of the tower. Hooded and cloaked, it lithely darted through the ditch at the wall's feet, then started sneaking through the detritus of the battlefield towards the Coalition's camp. Each moment brought the figure closer to the camp.

Jumping down quickly from the idle siege engine, Kellintil called out for one of the sentries. Explaining what she had seen, the Wood Elf ran off to grab an officer. It did not take long before one of the few remaining paladins of the Lady's Guard was peeking through the spyglass to confirm what she had seen.

"Thank you, ensign, we'll see to it. Thank you for your diligence," the elven knight noted resolutely.

The last thing that Kellintil expected was that fifteen minutes later, the now unhooded figure would be dragged in front of her, thrashing and shouting. One of the soldiers who had gone with the paladin held a short blade in their hand, pulled from the infiltrator's belt.

She screeched, "I said, let me speak to Kellintil Foamfollower! She'll confirm my identity I am – "

" – Lilandria Caulithil!" Kellintil sprinted up, out of breath by the time she reached the grouping.

Using a rag, the paladin wiped paint and makeup off the elf's ears and face to reveal the truth of her identity. It was, without a doubt, the mother of Kellintil's lover. The paladin leading the men growled, "You know this woman, ensign?"

"Aye, Ser!" Kellintil pointed, "That is the mother of Ser Malindria Caulithil. Her name is Lilandria, and she served His Majesty's Whisperers for many years."

Grunting, the paladin ordered, "Let her go."

Freed, Lilandria stood straight and harumphed. She straightened the simple slave's tunic she wore under her cloak. A quick movement snatched her blade back from the soldier that had it, then slid it away into her scabbard. "Thank you, Kell, you're a gem."

Kell rushed up and hugged Lilandria tightly. She had known the other woman since her first memories, when she and Malindria had first started to play together. "Lady's Breath, Lily, where have you been? How are you out here now? What in the Hells is going on?" Those and a half dozen other questions came tumbling out of Kellintil.

"Well, first thing to tell you is that Malindria lives, my dear." Lily pet the sea elf's hair gently.

"What...?" Mal's voice was barely a croak as hope attempted to tear its way out through sorrow.

“She lives and is currently someplace safe, protected by a person I trust very much. It is a long story, and I do not want to stand out here in the open to tell it. She said you were reporting to a man named Wavelash. Is that Indirial Wavelash?”

“Y-yes?”

Lily smiled before kissing the top of the shorter elf’s head, “Good. Let’s go talk to him straight away. He’s reasonable; he needs to hear what I have to say.”

Wavelash was sitting on the cot in his tent when Kell and Lily burst into it. One hand held his head as he stared down at another pile of missives. Exhaustion etched his features. He did not even look up, “What?”

“Captain, Sir, there’s someone that I think you need to talk to...”

“Go away, Foamfollower. Go desert or something.”

“Indirial Wavelash, will you stop sulking and stand to?” Lily commanded in her best matronly tone, one that had seen multiple children through adolescence in the past.

Wavelash shot up to his feet, blinking in surprise at the sudden parade that had assembled. Not only were Kell and Lily there, but the whole echelon of scouts and their attendant paladin followed along.

“What in Calumnia’s rotten hole is going on?” demanded the captain.

Lily smiled, “Well...”

General Baldwin Aeglynn commanded the central area of the Royal Pavilion at the heart of the Coalition camp. Colorful canvas stood tall and proud, large enough to be seen unaided from Noctus’s walls on a good day, with the pennants of Galandir snapping proudly from each of its poles. It

was large enough to accommodate a huge number of officers and their attendants at once.

This moment was one such instance.

“The scouts confirm the spy’s report,” the general began. He tapped spots along the coast south and west of the siege. “At least six Imperial eagles were counted forming up here and here. Near forty thousand men. Add to that the approximate twenty that the garrison can put forward in a sally, and that is a force near, if not greater than our own reduced strength. We are flanked, we are dealing with a desertion crisis, and let’s not even begin with the various camp fevers afflicting the men. It is time to withdraw and fully fortify Caer Aldwell and Caer Galandir.”

Numerous heads murmured assent, bobbing up and down to agree with the Ghontish general. He had fought both the goblin tribes of the Heartscrags and against the Imperials. The human was well respected by most of the Coalition. The grey in his hair and beard lent credence to his wisdom.

One of the officers of the Nomad Kingdom stood, her jewelry glittering and jangling as she moved. Nictitating lenses blinked at the general over the yellow cat’s eyes as the devilkin asked, “Can we withdraw quickly enough to prevent the legions marching to cut us off?”

“If we leave anything a single soldier can’t carry and march tonight, without delay, I think we can just make it. At worst, a rearguard with our cavalry skirmishing against a legion or three while the rest of the army breaks towards the fortresses. After that, near equal won’t matter, they’d need quintuple our numbers to force a border crossing beyond simple raiding.”

Baldwin laid it out for the table at large, making sure not to mince his words. His gaze was for the man who had spoken little since the conclave had been called. At the head of the table sat High King Theonar Hathilan, third of his name. He glowered and shifted, obvious anger contorting what should be serene and handsome features. Every few moments, one of the

soothsayers he insisted on dragging everywhere leaned over to murmur some new interpretation in his ear as the general spoke. Bodyguards of the Lady's Guard flanked him even further out from the garishly outfitted charlatans.

Elected head of the Coalition after the death of King Theobert of Tor Ghontir, with whom he had shared the duties previously, Theonar had thrown all of his energy at seeing Noctus taken off the map and its citizens exiled to Calexis, if they survived at all. Retreat would be admitting defeat, and having to acknowledge peace would only come through the negotiations that the king seemed to hate.

It was when Theonar leaned forward to speak that Lilandria really started to pay attention. She had floated at the edge of the tent the whole time the meeting had been going. Ordered to stay outside, she had already slipped her minder, then found her way inside. It took a moment of pretending to be an aide offering food, and then she ducked behind a piece of furniture and was forgotten about. Her hand strayed to the hilt of her hidden blade as she watched the scene.

“Tell me, General,” the High King did not bother standing, just leaning forward as he spoke. He had been losing weight and a gaunt quality had infected him, “Since when did the men of the Ghont become such irredeemable cowards?”

Multiple gasps came from the Ghontish delegation at the affront. Baldwin shushed them with a gentle motion with one hand for calm and silence. Focusing upon the king once more, “Your Highness, I understand this is upsetting news, but we are on the precipice of one of the greatest military disasters that can be experienced. The spy who brought us this information should be commended, as we can now save the lives of tens of thousands of our men. It is time to order the withdrawal, and it must be done now.”

“Must! MUST BE DONE!” screeched the King as he stood from the wood-carved throne, a portable rendition of the one in the Ivory City, “You speak to me as if you can command me! ME! I am King! I rule here! Tor

Ghontir only exists because my father took pity on you dogs and gifted you land he never should have!"

The general grit his teeth in frustration, "If my wording was poor, I apologize, Your Highness. Regardless, there is little time. Withdrawal is the only safe option that remains."

Murmurs and assent once more traveled around the table, but Theonar was no more listening to those voices than that of his most capable general, "Your apologies mean nothing to me! Your king should be on his knees begging my forgiveness for your forked tongue! Hanged! For insubordination! That should be what happens!"

Baldwin tossed his marshal's rod upon the table to land with a clatter loud enough make the king start in surprise, "We are not your subjects! You have no more authority to hang me than to demand a boy not even of age come and kiss your feet! We left Calexis to escape a tyrant, and we will not trade one for another!"

"Bah! Galandir does not need the help of mayflies to defeat this evil empire, full of its heresy and cruelty! Run away, like your people have always done, Baldwin! Find some other nation to gift you their hinterlands!" screeched the king, giving voice to wild, impossible implications.

Gathering his rod, Baldwin's voice was low and angry, "Tor Ghontir declares this war council has run its course. The men of the Ghont will not waste their lives for a ruler who has clearly given leave to his senses and allowed Calumnia to play fiddle within his skill." He shouted the next part, letting it carry throughout the tent, "Tor Ghontir withdraws from this Coalition. We will break camp and march this very night; any who wish to travel with our column may have our protection, for we value the friendship of any that are not utter fools."

Turning, Baldwin strode away from the council table, the other men and women of Tor Ghontir moving in lockstep behind their general and exiting as well.

“Humans! They work with the Empire! Feed them information! Our failures all belong to that weak-blooded tribe! We will prepare a new assault!” cackled the High King, unreasonably happy to see the largest contingent of his soldiers declare they would abandon his cause.

Devilkin stood next, their commander scowling across the table at the High King. Her voice matched her gaze, “You spend our people’s lives like water, then heap insult and foolishness upon your greatest ally, driving them from your tent.” She spat a goblet of phlegm, nearly landing it right on the King, but missing by a pace, “The Nomad Kingdom withdraws from this council. May the Dark One take your rotten soul before you take the rest of us with you, old fool.”

It was not long before the elven nation stood alone, the High King ranting about betrayal and insults from within his tent.

Lilandria slipped out with the last procession, doing nothing to hide the disgust on her features. It had been tempting to stay and try to end the man, but the bodyguard retinue was twice the size she had expected, and all of them were taking their duties seriously.

“He’s gone insane!” ranted Wavelash as he paced back and forth in his tent.

“I always knew Theonar was a Calumnia-addled fool, but he’s gone too far,” growled Lilandria, having just summarized the dissolution of the Coalition’s war council.

“We have to leave,” Kellintil sighed, “We’ll take Valor, ride as fast as we can...”

“Valor lives?” Lilandria blinked at the smaller elf, “Mal was certain he had perished.”

“More dumb luck...” Kell gave a wan smile. She paused, then followed up more seriously, “... or just the gods really having a keen interest in this whole affair.”

Lily hmphed faintly, “You might have a point. Indi, you need to speak to General Hathilan...”

“That’s the king’s cousin!”

“So am I! So is half the elven nobility! He’s also not a complete dunce! Beg him to mutiny and take the elven army home! Otherwise, it gets slaughtered in the field by eight – EIGHT!! – Imperial legions and the path to the Ivory City will yawn open!” Lilandria surprised herself by the vigor of her ranting. Perhaps it was the sheer incompetence that galled her the most, she thought to herself as she continued, “Then it won’t matter who is anyone’s cousin, as anyone worth a bent copper will be clapped in chains and sold at auction in Noctus’s markets! They’ll tear the Temple of Our Lady down and parade its treasures through the streets of Ilium in triumph!”

“I wouldn’t even know how to get him to see me...” The captain prevaricated.

Kellintil nudged him with an elbow, “Isn’t he the one whose handsome, young, virile adjutant you’ve been sleeping with?”

Flushing purple, Wavelash started to stammer in embarrassment, “Foamfollower! You know better than...!”

It forced a giggle out of Lily, “Oh, Indi, what *would* your wife think?”

“She introduced them,” Kellintil informed Lily drily, “Seems she thinks they’re pretty together, and them keeping each other warm at night, well, she wanted the idea of it to keep *her* warm at night.”

“I take it back. Kell, your aunt is a vixen.”

Wavelash made an indignant noise, “I’ll go speak to him right now, see if he can get me in to see the general. I’ll try to make it back without getting hung for the suggestion.”

“Thank you, Indi,” Lily leaned down and kissed the sea elf’s cheek chastely. Kellintil followed suit with a soft, “Thank you, Uncle.”

As Wavelash strode out, pulling on his coat, Kellintil turned to her lover’s mother, “Where’s Mal?”

“In the city, of course.”

“No, I mean, where did you stick her that she’d be safe, and who is she with?”

Lily fidgeted, “Well, that’s a bit of a longer story. She’s, well... she’s with her sister.”

Blinking in confusion, “Since when does Mal have a sister?”

“Since about twenty-nine years ago.”

“Weren’t you spying on Constantus back... oh. *Ohhhhh.*” Wide eyes gave way to a scowl, “Lady’s Breath, Lily, did you...?”

“I gave Severan Constantus a daughter, yes. The most beautiful half-blood you’ll ever see. Looks like what her father would, if he were a woman.” Lily let herself sigh, gaze drifting off as she thought of her dead lover once more.

“Lily!”

Snapping back to the elf in front of her, “Apologies, dear Kell. Once this sordid affair is over, I’ll sit down and give everyone the whole story. For now, just know that I trust my dear Aurelia with her sister, and I believe they’ve bonded quite well. Relly would sooner fling herself from those walls than harm a hair on Mal’s head.”

“How much of that is even the truth?”

Considering for a moment, Lily eventually responded with, “Most of it. I think.”

“Even when I was younger, you were infamous for just making shit up, Lily.”

“Part and parcel of being a spy, I suppose.”

Kell sniffed in annoyance, “No, I think that’s just a character trait of yours and always was. My mother always told me ‘Mal’s adorable, but I wouldn’t trust her mother further than I could throw your father’s ship’.”

Lily grinned, “Well, your mother has always been wise beyond what her two centuries would normally indicate.”

“Three! Lady’s Breath, Lily, did you not know and just... guess instead of asking?”

“It’s the teal skin, it makes it so hard to tell...”

“Lady save me from liars!” snarled out the sea elf. Further rebuke was interrupted as the flaps of the tent pulled aside.

A phalanx of armored elves stood, hands on their weapons. Each wore the tabard of the Lady’s Guard, as well as further finery and golden cloaks, indicating they belonged to the King’s personal retinue. The one holding the tent open cleared his throat, “Caulithil? The King requests your presence.”

“I am indisposed at the moment...”

“Now. And I misspoke, this isn’t a request.” Hands squeezed the hilts of weapons as elves shifted slightly forward.

Lilandria plastered a false smile onto her features, “But, of course.” She turned briefly to her original companion, “Keep yourself safe, and I’ll be back to you as swiftly as I may.”

“I’ll be in Mal’s tent, you know what it looks like, and it has your family’s pennant. I’ll be... putting things away...” She glanced over towards the troupe of soldiers, “... since she’s fallen, she won’t need any of it anymore.”

“Good girl,” murmured Lilandria before turning to follow the paladins out and back towards the royal pavilion.

Activity filled the camp as men, and the other allied races worked against time to break camp and start marching. Torches had been lit everywhere to

allow those with weaker sight to see in the dim moonlight. Elven squads and regiments sat sullenly, their faces showing they knew what their fate would be should they remain behind. Several times, the squad had to dodge carts or animals loaded with equipment as they made their way to the pavilion.

In the center, the war council's table still stood, forgotten food and drink adorning it. The king's meal appeared to have been completely consumed, though the plates were clean of all but smudges and stains. He stood near his wooden throne as Lilandria was led in and shown where to stand on the far side of the table.

That they had not searched her for a blade had surprised her, and she could feel the reassurance of the old Imperial steel hanging from her belt beneath her cloak. She offered a quick curtsy, "Your Highness."

He seemed far less frantic than during the meeting. Still gaunt, with deep circles beneath his eyes, he appeared more the monarch that Lily remembered. Not what he had once been, but closer to it. As he spoke, his voice was calmer, but still rough from far too much yelling recently, "I have been told by multiple people you should be commended for bringing us the intelligence of the Imperial landing. So here it is, commendations." He picked up his wine cup, pointlessly made of gold on a battlefield, and raised it to her.

"Your Highness does me honor, thank you, sire," she offered another curtsy. She hoped this was the extent of what he wanted to say, but she knew better than to hope.

"Why did you fail to kill Severan Constantus?"

Her false smile faltered and vanished, "Your Highness, he was well protected..."

"... and why did every other person sent to do your job fail? Why were they all butchered in some way or another?"

“Again, Your Highness, he was a paranoid and well-protected target. I am lucky I lasted within his household as long as I did before I was forced home...”

Malice worked its way into the King’s tone, “Was it because you’re a harlot? That he bedded you like the common whore you are, cousin?” He hurled his goblet at her with the last word, making their common blood sound like an invective.

Lilandria ducked, letting the goblet sail past to clatter off a tent pole. “That never happened!”

One of the King’s soothsayers leaned in close. Even from across the table, Lilandria could smell the stink of hallucinogenic weeds and powders on the elf’s garishly decorated robes. All manner of charms and trinkets jingled as he moved, some of them going beyond bordering on heretical to downright blasphemous. Pale lips moved to murmur to their sovereign, but Lily was confused by her inability to make out what was said.

Is this what it’s like to be a human? The thought flitted through her mind only for a moment.

“New truths! Yes! New truth!” exclaimed the King. His eyes maddened as he regarded Lily, “I always knew it was the Imperial hero, whomever the Constantus would be that will try to tear down all my good works. But it never made sense when they also said it would be my blood. How could it be both?” His smile was both triumphant and insane as he regarded her, “But I figured it out, didn’t I? How many brats did you whelp for him? Or is it only the one?”

“What in Calumnia’s rotten gash have you started to truck with, cousin?” Lily used the familiar term in return, no longer interested in showing the man deference. Her gaze darted from bodyguard to bodyguard, and each stood ready, hands on their weapons. “How do paladins suffer you to listen to this charlatan and not strike you both down?”

“What in her name indeed, cousin? These men renounced their oaths long ago. They serve me... and her.” The king giggled like a young boy for a moment, “But please, do tell me. I won’t even be mad. I just want to know if I was right. She belongs to you, doesn’t she? The one who is always leading the raids and slaughters, who wears her father’s crest oh so proudly... does it hurt to know she doesn’t call herself Caulithil?”

“I have your pardon in this issue?”

The king clapped his hands, “Oh, yes, you certainly do. Please tell me?”

“Yes,” Lilandria admitted, “Aurelia’s my daughter. Whatever these fools are telling you about her is wrong. She wants nothing of killing you, just having us leave this place and her in peace. Go home to Galandir, and she will never pursue you.”

His goblet gone, the King grabbed the wine bottle that remained on the table. He uncorked it and drank straight from it. After the pull, he checked the label, “Oh, it’s one of yours, cousin! Lovely! Your family is still so good at this.” He then pivoted to the next question without warning, “Were you in love with him? That bear of a human?”

Lilandria kept searching to see which exit might give her the quickest and safest way out of the tent. None of them appeared promising. “I wouldn’t have given him a daughter if I hadn’t loved him.”

“Which is why you murdered so many of our agents to save him!” He giggled again, “You treasonous little strumpet! If it wasn’t for the treason, I’d find it quite romantic and endearing, I promise. But, I do have an offer for you.”

“What could you possibly give me at this point, cousin?”

“Oh, don’t be like that. I’ll tell you what... you be a good little assassin, sneak back into Noctus and... murder your own daughter... and I’ll give you Severan back.”

Lilandria's body went still as her gaze narrowed back onto the King, "Pray tell, how in the Blessed Lady's name, could you even pretend to be able to do something like that?"

"Oh, cousin, as I said before, it has nothing at all to do with Her, and everything to do with *her*!" The King casually dropped the wine bottle back onto the table, it clanked loudly as it landed, the weight of the liquid in the base keeping it upright. "You bring me Aurelia Constantus's head, and I will dredge Severan up out of the Hells and hand him back to you. You can spend centuries with that mayfly if you want. All yours, and maybe you can even figure out a way to give him more daughters to make up for the one you will sacrifice for your *actual* flesh and blood, your sovereign. Me."

Realization blossomed as Lilandria's eyes went wide while watching the King, "You're truly insane. You can't truck with her! She is the essence of deceit! She'll take your soul at the first opportunity!"

"The power I have earned says otherwise, cousin," He leaned forward over the table, but still well out of a blade's reach, "Your only chance. Answer now. Severan or Aurelia? Who will I find in the Hells tomorrow morning?"

Lilandria would realize later that she never even considered the offer. As much as she worshipped Severan, he had been dead a long time, and she had learned to live a life without his presence. Her daughter had just been returned to her, and she had no interest in being without again. She snarled, "My only hope is you join him as swiftly as possible, and he entertains himself treating your soul to all the hardship and pain it deserves."

"Alas, cousin, I expected that answer, but I wanted to give you the chance. Family and all! To show my continued benevolence, though, I still have brought you back one of your lovers. The Imperials thought they were ridding themselves of a problem gifting us all the corpses of our fallen back after their Trade Gate nearly fell. All those souls lost on a battlefield I had already consecrated as an altar in Calumnia's beautiful name..."

Lily spun and tried to run as the King ranted. Former paladins drew their long blades, and the spy went straight for the nearest one instead of trying to dodge away. It surprised the man, but even more surprising was the flashing steel that she produced. Point first, it was jammed in under the guard's helmet with such force that it came out the top of his head, sending the helm spinning up and off.

Leaving the Imperial steel sheathed in the dead man's skull, Lily grabbed the corpse's sword instead. Fine mithril craftsmanship would serve her better, and she knew how to wield it as well as any dagger. She got the blade up just in time to block a slash from the man nearest to her. Instead of an attack, she whipped her cloak at the knight, wrapping it around his armored helm. As he struggled to unravel himself, she jammed her blade hard into his armpit, parting steel chain links with the mithril weapon. That one would stagger away, screaming and trying to clamp down on the gout of blood that came out before collapsing.

The King cackled at the spectacle, the brawl happening right in front of him.
“Rotheran! Oh, Rotheran! Come give your wife a hug!”

“Liiiiiyyyyy...” came the groan from deep within the tent. One of the dividing curtains bulged, then pushed forward as a figure staggered through it, affecting the image of some twisted birth.

Mithril armor had fused into its skin, and one hand had melted into the pommel of what had once been a beautifully wrought weapon from the Ivory City's greatest smiths. The stag's head of the Caulithil family was still visible, etched with acid into the flat of the blade. Mercifully, the visor for its misshapen helm had also melted shut, preventing anyone from seeing what had become of the man's face.

As Lilandria stared in horror, her husband raised the ruin of his sword and advanced towards her.

Chapter 11

The Dread Goddess

As the Sundering cracked the world, so too was the shadow of the Blessed Lady riven from her. Given form and will, she became a creature of spite and hate. As our Lady embodies creation and wisdom, Her mirror seeks to bring destruction and deceit to the world. She is the dread goddess of the Hells, Calumnia. – Canon of the Son, Chapter 1, Verse 31

“Monster! Bastard!” screamed Lily across the table at the mad sovereign. She launched herself over the table at the King, even as he cackled, only to find her blade turned by the oathbreaker bodyguard that stood beside him.

Scars lined the elf’s face beneath his helm, old enough that his beard had a few shots of grey in it. One of the masters of the Lady’s Guard, or was, once. A hard shove sent Lily staggering back, and she nearly lost her footing on an overturned bottle.

“Wouldn’t want to spoil your husband’s fun,” spat the former paladin, sneering at her while keeping himself interposed between the King and Lily.

“Liiiiilyyyy...” groaned the thing that had once been her spouse. It brought the sword that had been fused into its hand down in a slow, overhead chop.

Lily danced out of the way, a corner of her cloak sliced through by her dead spouse's hack at her. The corpse tugged at the blade, buried so deep in the table, it left Rotheran pulling at the weapon, unable to simply drop it as it had become one with him.

"Oh, come on! Kill her! I expected more out of you!" giggled the King. He scooped up a plate of grapes, then began tossing the berries at Rotheran.

With Rotheran unable to attack, Lily launched herself back at Theonar. Again, she found blade blocked by the former Master of the Order. He snarled, his broad frame allowing him to easily shove her back. This time he swung, and blocking the blow left Lily's arm numb with the strength behind it.

Ducking the next strike, Lily unclipped her cloak and tossed it into the face of Theonar's protector. Taking her moment as the guard untangled himself from the cloak, Lily stabbed forward and put the blade directly through the center of Theonar's chest.

"Oh," the King's voice was soft as he looked down at the blade. It had gone straight through the center of his sternum and all the way out through the back. He giggled again, "You thought that would work?"

Even with bodyguards closing in all around her, their master having tossed the cloak aside, Lily was forced to stare in disbelief.

No blood seeped out into the King's silken shirt, and he moved with casual indifference as he grabbed the bottle of wine once more. Taking a deep chug, he ahh'ed softly in satisfaction, "My lady, the true lady, has already granted me the power to defeat death. Do you think I didn't use it on myself *first*?"

Powerful hands wrapped around Lily's arms as bodyguards grappled with her. She kicked and tried to jerk away from the warriors, "Why? What is worth this madness, you fucking fool?!"

"I will not die to some mayfly's blade! Or fall to the corrupted blood you spat out of your womb!" He snarled out the invectives, "The only cost is this

shithole of a city! I will feed their souls to Calumnia! I will be immortal, as will any who serve me!"

His eyes flared with power as he murmured words that felt like daggers in Lilandria's ears. Infernal tongue, something not even the Devilkin dared utter around any but their own kind, danced in the air. Mystic might pulsed briefly through the tent as the two men already dead began to rise.

"I will use this city as the vanguard of my endless army. I will tear Ilium down and retake the lands of the Ghont. Mount Thumnir shall be shattered, both dwarves and giants repaid for the treachery of their fathers. My empire will be eternal!"

Even as the oathbreakers laughed with their king, Lily let both knees go slack underneath her. She fell free from surprised grasps, one hand pulling a belt knife free from a blackguard's belt. Jabbing into the softness behind a knee joint, the guard collapsed in a clatter of mithril with a scream. These men still lived and still felt pain.

Lunging forward, she tackled the King, sending both spilling. She could smell him, this close. Rot oozed up her nostrils, and she could feel the cold clamminess of his skin. Yellow stains had started to form around his dying teeth, the illusion that had kept some semblance of the old ruler in place was finally banished.

Lily grabbed hold of the mithril blade that had cavalierly been left in the sovereign's chest. With a twist and a rip, she tore it free in time to spin and take the hand off the master of the fallen paladins. He screeched in pain, gauntlet and weapon clattering on the ground before Lily sprung away.

"You're right," hissed the elven spy, "When my daughters find out what you've done, either of them, they'll end you."

The corpse king pushed himself partway up off the silken rug that had been laid along the floor of the pavilion. He screeched, voice growing higher in pitch, "Kill the bitch! Tear her apart! What good are you if you can't kill me a single woman!?"

The guard had collapsed in on where the king lay to attempt to capture Lilandria. This left a path once more, and she broke for it, sprinting out towards freedom. Her entire flight was followed by Theonar's screams, the faint glow of green emanating from the spaces between the pavilion's flaps.

She did not stop running until she reached the tent with her family's crest. It was a familiar sight, with its white and teal stripes and the gaily colored pennants flapping above it. True to her word, Kellintil was just outside the tent and already had Valor there with her.

Lily skidded to a halt in front of elf and horse, panting hard. She still held a naked blade, coated in blood, in one hand, and not the one she had left with.

“Lady’s Breath, Lily, what happ –”

Cutting off the sea elf, Lily had to push the charger’s nose away as it tried to nuzzle a familiar person, “The King’s gone insane. He’s trucking with Calumnia to raise the dead. We need to leave. Now!” Lily grabbed the sea elf’s wrist and started to pull her towards the horse.

“Wait! What!?” The sea elf pulled away, yanking her wrist back, “What in the Hells is going on!”

“We need to go!” hissed Lily. “I just *killed* two of his guards to get away, and they fucking *got back up!* He’s lost any semblance of sanity!”

Kell’s eyes went wide, “You’re not joking.”

“Of course not! Please, Kell, let’s go! Do you have everything?”

“Y-yes, anything important...”

Lilandria vaulted up onto Valor’s saddle, “Good boy. So happy to see you.” She reached down and helped the shorter woman into the saddle behind her, “We’re going to have to ride straight to the Ivory City and tell the Council and pray they can organize militia and reserves fast enough.”

“I-I hadn’t even gotten to tell you the news… The Ghontish! They-they sent one of their mages to the Council via teleportation. He told them the whole affair, even had the Regent’s seal on the missive! Theonar’s been removed!” She motioned at the camp, and the last vestiges of the elven army were starting to pack up what could be quickly gathered so they could follow along behind the other Coalition members in marching home.

Lilandria scanned the camp in wonder. She had been so focused on getting to Kellintil that she had paid no attention to other people as she had fled, only making sure they were not trying to stop her. “Lady’s Breath, wonders never cease.”

“I know! The Council used a speaking trinket to tell General Hathilan he no longer reported to the King… the old king… and to march straight home!”

A smirk unfurled on Lilandria’s features, “Eight legions and my daughter will descend upon this camp. When Calumnia takes Theonar’s black soul, he’ll end up in whatever one of the Hells that fools belong in. Aurelia will figure out to drop him into a vat of Ilian Fire, she’s as clever as her father.”

“We need to find the general and warn him of this, Lily…”

“We will, Kell, on the road. I want to be as far away from this cursed fucking city as I can get.”

Whipping the reins, Valor raced out of the camp. Kellintil clung to Lilandria’s waist as they thundered towards the retreating column of Coalition troops that had already started to march.

Aurelia stole her way back through the city after saying her goodbyes to Antony. They had sworn to see each other again privately as soon as possible, granted each one last moment of affection, and then Aurelia had been off. She needed to ensure that her sister was aware of their mother’s success in escaping to the Coalition camp.

It had been impossible to miss the torches and lanterns being lit suddenly all over the camp in the dark of the night after Aurelia and Antonius had no longer been distracting each other. At the very least, the men of the Ghontish nation were preparing to march and would likely be in column by morning. It was fast enough that there was a chance they would bypass the Imperial landings entirely.

The Knight-Captain walked through the remnants of Foundry Street and the district named for it, seeking to be left alone and unseen as she returned home. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she still could hear the little voice demanding she account for what she had done, and at the very least, she could be forced to view the destruction her imagination had wrought. Twisted bones of structures clawed at the darkened air. There were no Blackshield lanterns on the corners, or warm hearths in this part of the city any longer. Wood had become ash and cinder, iron nails slag and ruin, while kilns and forges that had been built to withstand the fires of industry had cracked and shattered, failing when bathed in the malevolence of Ilian Fire. Not for the first time, Aurelia wondered if they should have given it a different name, for it was a different deity that reigned over the Hells.

Sulfur permeated the air, as did the bitter reek of charred structures and corpses. Imperial estimates had put the Coalition casualties in the firing of the western district at nearly twenty thousand. Some had guessed more. Aurelia was one of the ones who had. Her tally sheets usually proved correct, as she had a decent head for figures. With the remaining regiments she had seen sulking in the enemy camp they were down to maybe fifty-five thousand men, sixty if they were lucky. There had been nearly ninety thousand before the second assault. Scratch some off for desertion, and the losses were staggering.

Deciding they would never know the true number, too many bodies had been either liquified or cremated to tell, the half-blood knight stepped around a group of scavengers. They had sharp enough points on their ears that while not half-blooded, they could see her better than most, and that she was a woman was of keen interest. As they shuffled nearer, she bared

Defiance's hilt from under her cloak, and suddenly the gaggle of vultures found somewhere more interesting to be than anywhere near Aurelia.

They may have been looking for any remaining riches. Some trove that may have been forgotten, left behind in the sudden civilian evacuation before the Foundry District had been turned into a death trap. They had chosen to funnel the enemy to the west, instead of down the central Trade street precisely because there were the fewest number of homes in this district.

Unfortunately, it had been the thickest with industry and businesses. As with everything, it had been a gamble. If it broke the back of the Coalition, it could all be rebuilt. If it did not, it had crippled Noctus's ability to build or maintain anything itself, as barely a smithy, foundry, or charcoal kiln remained in any of the other parts of the city. Win or die, had been the dice roll that Aurelia had convinced the Proconsul to take, already knowing what the woman would decide.

What did Licinia Pullo care for the city itself? The answer was obvious on the bulldog's face, as she had come to Noctus and Medraut to enrich herself. Her and the Second had come to dive headfirst into the pile of spoils they imagined dragging from the rotting carcass of the Ivory City. Even Aurelia had to admit that it would be a tragedy if the last city remaining from the ancient world, the only known metropolis that had stood since before the Sundering, were to be torn down and scattered.

It had been her sister who had convinced the half-blood to let their mother make the attempt, and not through words. Giggling together like siblings, feeling that connection that she had longed for, and then wondering what it would be like to tell her that her home and everything she had ever known was gone. Aurelia could not do it. Her heart could only harden so much before it threatened to shatter within her breast.

She skirted a pile of corpses that had been dragged out of the rubble, and more wretches and scavengers scattered. Almost all of them were half-bloods, left behind and forgotten by masters fleeing Noctus to return to

Ilium across the sea as the war dragged on. They had been chipping away and tugging at the now hardened piles of armor slag, hoping for some to be precious mithril to be hawked for another day's bowl of gruel. Far harder than steel, but somehow lighter, only ensorcelled blades such as Defiance, which Severan had used to kill King Theobert, could easily defeat it. There had been little doubt why Severan's men had taken such pains to recover the blade after their hero had fallen and see it delivered to his heir when the time came.

Blackshields and militia had been cremating corpses as quickly as they could, trying to keep away the ever-present threat of disease. There were too many. Enough Coalition troops had died to account for one in ten of the city's population, never mind the guardsmen and militia that had been sacrificed alongside them to make it seem like the Imperials were routing. As victorious as the Empire had been, there had been weeping and mourning aplenty, tucked away where the celebrations did not have to be interrupted.

A circuitous route was chosen. Aurelia did it for a pair of reasons; to make it unclear where she had been and to see everything with her own eyes. The main thoroughfare, Foundry Street itself, was clear enough after the work of the city guard, but the side alleys were a mess of ash heaps and collapsed brick structures. If anyone had trailed her, not that she thought they had, she could lose them as well as herself quickly enough.

Her half-blooded nature aided as much as betrayed her. Pathways were able to be found, detritus avoided, and threats seen far off as scavengers and criminals continued to haunt the ruined district. At the same time, Aurelia could see every inch of the horror she had designed and envisioned. Every corpse that had been missed in the cleanup, and there were many still, as well as how many shattered lives the ruined businesses and homes represented. The one kindness that the Proconsul had given her was telling the Metalworker's Guild that it was her idea, though her motivation was to make herself seem even crueler and more in charge of things than she already was.

It kept their representatives off Aurelia's doorstep.

Aurelia stepped through a barricade long since torn down, put up originally to protect the firebreak from any Coalition troops trying to get through it and into the center of the city, built from the buildings that had been demolished to create several hundred feet of space between the sacrificial areas of Noctus and the heart of where its citizens would still be able to live.

"Ahoy, scum!"

The call broke Aurelia out of the thoughts that had kept her mired in the disaster that was the Foundry District. Blackshields approached, a patrol of the city guardsmen, each with their lacquered black shields that the guard had taken their nickname from. Chain shirts, steel helms, and hard features were common among the men and women of the squad.

Aurelia regarded the group with a narrowed gaze. She wondered if the Blackshields were there as part of an actual organized patrol or just there to shake down people coming and going from the ruins to get a cut or a few coins. Noctus's guard were notoriously corrupt, with only the defense of the city itself standing as something that would shake them out of their habitual graft.

Identifying the rank of their spokesman, probably the ringleader, Aurelia stood to and answered, "Good evening to you, sergeant. You have the honor of addressing a knight."

He scoffed, "Sure, next yer gonna tell us yer the Legate hisself." The others of the squad chuckled at the joke.

"No, but I am what I say I am. Move aside, please," Aurelia started to walk past them, making no effort to show any deference, as it would not be expected by someone of her rank.

"Now, wait 'ere, missy." The sergeant stopped Aurelia with a tight grip on her shoulder, "There's a fine fer bein' in the district, double fer at night."

Aurelia knew there was no such thing. Jerking away from the offending hand, she considered whether to just pay the fine. A bribe, in actuality, to get the squad to go away. Going along with it could also lead to greater demands, as it was not like Aurelia had forgotten her coin purse and some spending money.

“Tell me your price, then, Sergeant.”

“Nay my price, missy, ‘tis the city’s price to keep us all safe. Inn’t that right, boys?” The sergeant revealed a gap-toothed smile.

The other Blackshields nodded along, false smiles painted on their features as they fanned out and circled around where Aurelia stood next to their leader. Keeping her hand away from her blade, letting it hide beneath the cloak she wore, instead she told the sergeant, “I care not where the coin goes, just so long as I have a quiet night.”

“Well, quiet nights are our spesh-ee-ality,” drawled out the sergeant. His accent was straight from the Half-Blood district, and the faint points on his ears showed one of his parents was likely a half-blood. It explained how he had spotted Aurelia so quickly in the dark. “Just a pair of silver senators to see to yer safety and to the rebuildin’ of such an important part of our fair city.”

Senators, the name given to the silver coin as the image of whatever man or woman was named Speaker was stamped into them. Over the years, dozens of faces existed on the coins, so that no pair of them were usually the same.

Coins jingled together as Aurelia decided that speed and convenience were more important than a small amount of wealth. She dropped a pair of silver coins into the outstretched hand of the thin-blooded sergeant. His grin was insufferable as he eyed the pouch the coin had come from, “Did I say two? I meant four. Apologies, missy.”

“The title is ‘Ser’, sergeant,” groused Aurelia as she added another pair of coins.

“Beggin’ yer pardon, sir,” he mispronounced the honorific intentionally, “But there inn’t no black armor on ye.”

“Shockin’ that, given the chance, we walk without it. Almost like it’s a burden,” grumbled Aurelia as she pushed past the sergeant, replete with his newfound wealth.

He grunted as their shoulders brushed briefly, “Now hold here, we inn’t done quite yet. One more thing o’ ye we’ll be askin’...”

Patience spent, Aurelia whirled on the man. Steel sang as her father’s blade cleared its scabbard, and the power within flared briefly as she swung it laterally. It took the top off the man’s shield in a single swipe, magic that allowed it to carve through mithril easily removing lacquered wood and steel struts. The ends of leather straps from the man’s gauntlet fluttered to the ground next to the clattering bit of shield.

“You’ll ask nothing further, sergeant, or tonight ends poorly for you, and as many of your men who are willing to stand to before the Lady and me.” Aurelia made no attempt to hide the tone of threat in her voice.

Blackshields took a step back, sharp gasps of apprehension coming from their ranks. Fear blossomed on the sergeant’s face, but the veteran was able to get it under control and pushed away quickly enough. His body language was guarded as his own blade was bared while he tossed away the ruin of his shield, “Who the bloody ‘ell are ye?”

“None of your fucking business, sergeant. You have your coin, leave me to my travels. Nothing you could ask is worth the continued trouble you will receive, I promise you.” Her grip tightened on the sword’s hilt as she glanced around at the various guardsmen. Half looked ready to bolt right that moment.

Their sergeant hawked and spat at Aurelia’s feet, “Fookin’ Bloody Saints, yer the reason ‘alf this city is a pile o’ cinders. Fook the lot o’ ye.”

Aurelia snorted out a laugh, “That’s more accurate than you know, sergeant.” She did not relax, her posture still defensive.

Waving with one hand, the sergeant called them off, “Inn’t worth it, boys, lets get the fook outta here.” Several goblets of spit were added to the first at Aurelia’s feet, and the guardsman began to back away.

It was only when the Blackshields were well away, only the ruined heater on the ground as evidence of their passage, that Aurelia let Defiance vanish within its sheath. The half-blood knight sighed to herself and continued towards her home, safer in the undamaged part of the Trade District of Noctus’s center.

Daphne was waiting for her mistress in the foyer when Aurelia arrived. After hanging her belt and sword from the armor rack that also kept her armor upright and orderly, Aurelia dropped herself into her favorite armchair.

“You smell like charcoal, Relly,” Daphne straddled Aurelia’s lap and settled into her comfortably with a gentle hug.

“I know,” Aurelia gently petted the other half-blood’s blonde curls. “I thought Mal and Andy would be waiting for me.”

“Last I saw, Mal had passed out in the study reading, and Andy was beat after the day’s chores, so went to bed when I said I would wait up.” Daphne kept her voice chipper as she cuddled into Aurelia happily.

“You’re in a mood,” Aurelia observed, kissing the crown of Daphne’s head.

“I’m a week past my bleed. Didn’t happen.”

“Wait, you’re...?”

“Pregnant, I think!” Daphne giggled, “Andy finally did it! We’re going to the Midwife’s on Son’s Day, and if she says it’s a good chance, we’ll go to the shrine and pay the priest for an augury!”

Aurelia gave the other woman a tight squeeze around the middle, “Good. I’m so happy for you.”

Both women held each other tightly for a long moment. Daphne broke the silence by saying, “I see your mother’s not with you. It went well?”

“It did,” Aurelia admitted. “Antony was able to be convinced, the few who saw her thought she was you, and then she got down over the walls safely. I think I saw some Ghontish troops starting to leave before I came back.”

“Mhm. And what were you and Antony doing while you waited to find out if it worked?” Daphne giggled, keeping her tone light.

“I, um, we...” A flush filled Aurelia’s cheeks.

“It’s not infidelity. You’re not bound to us, and we know you’ve been wanting your own suitor and not to share a married couple.” To accentuate this, she placed a kiss on each of Aurelia’s cheeks.

“I know, Daph.” Aurelia stroked Daphne’s cheek gently, “I love you and Andy, deeply, but we’ve always known that we were just having fun.”

Daphne turned serious, “Even if we’re not lovers... and I have very much enjoyed being your lover... we will always be sisters, Relly Half-Blood. I like that Aurelia Constantus lady a lot, too, but prefer Relly.”

Relly gave Daphne a soft smile, “Never think, for a moment, that I love you less if I’m not in the bed you and Andy share.”

The blonde half-blood patted Relly’s shoulder affectionately, “Good! Now kiss me to celebrate the child you’ll be godmother to.”

That brought a happy giggle out of Relly. She nuzzled against the neck and cheek of the soft, warm woman in her lap before capturing her lips in a kiss. They held each other tightly as they went through the familiar motions of passion. Both were breathless when they parted, smiling at each other.

“Now, tell me more about your Antony and what he’s like. I’d know who has enamored my beloved Relly,” Daphne smiled triumphantly at how flushed and heated she had left the other woman.

Relly did just as she was bid, going into detail about what had transpired in the tower. Daphne made sure to hear every part, especially the passionate details. She giggled and blushed throughout, but continued to ask.

Eventually, Daphne pointed out, “I know you plan to give a human a child, a true heir to your father’s name, so that it is not reliant on a half-blood to keep it alive, but have you considered you might need to use that as an excuse to retire? If the war’s over soon, you can put the armor aside.”

Aurelia gave Daphne, still in her lap, a curious look, “Why would I do that? I *like* being a knight.”

Daphne giggled, “Relly, love, my sweetest dear, do you look thirty?”

“Of course, I do.”

“Yes, you look like a thirty-year-old half-blood, or barely twenty by human reckoning. You will continue to look barely twenty until you’re nearly a century and a half old. I think folks will figure out you’re not purely human by then.”

Aurelia stared at Daphne, unable to form a thought.

Daphne rolled her eyes before clucking her tongue like a governess, “You immerse yourself in being fully human so thoroughly, you forget what you are sometimes. It hurts me when I realize it, because I love being what I am, and I want you to love it, also.”

Sighing, Aurelia pinched the bridge of her nose between two fingers, “You’re probably right. Maybe it’s time to settle down, let myself get with child...”

“Our children could play together! I could be godmother to yours as you are to mine! Yours will have a grandmother and an aunt! That’s so wonderful!” Daphne giggled and then pressed back in to snuggle into Aurelia’s chest, “I’ll be so happy when this war is over, when you can spend more time here at home being Relly.”

Aurelia chuckled softly, “To just be, and stop having to spend every moment wondering if I am not playing some part to perfection, that is my dream.”

“The gift of our blood, Relly, is that we will have centuries to find that space. You’re only a handful of years older than Andy and I. We’re all at the start of our lives, when we can still feel just like the humans that surround us. That will change. You should talk to some of the older half-bloods...”

“Like Calthus...”

Daphne nodded, “He asks about you every time we go to the Half-Blood Quarter. Still keeps your secret, too. He misses you.”

Aurelia fidgeted a little beneath Daphne, “I know, I... it’d be weird if a Knight-Captain went to see a retired servant...”

“Plus, going down to the district makes people associate you with Half-Bloods...”

“Yes!”

With a roll of her eyes and a gentle jab to the chest with a finger, Daphne reprimanded her mistress, “You only have a few years before that mask won’t work anymore. You have people that love you and will support you when that happens, do not disregard them for some imagined impropriety in your head.”

Aurelia sighed, “I keep dreading the day I have to go to the bondsman, declare my blood, then get auctioned.”

Daphne giggled, “I’m sure Antony will stand there dutifully with a bag of gold to buy you, then sign you over to freedman status. We’ll pay our bonds off that same day, and we can all become citizens at the same time!”

Relly laughed, “That’d be nice. What if someone is able to outbid me for my own bond, though?”

Daphne scoffed, “None of the nobles have people sitting at the bondsman waiting anymore. The magistrate rarely even opens the office and just

shows up to document new children coming of age. You could show up and be paid off before anyone knows.”

“Any peace probably ends the Toll. He’ll rarely have work.”

“Exactly.” Daphne stole several quick kisses from Aurelia’s lips, “Now, go wake your sister and give her the good news.” She freed Relly by sliding off her lap, bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet after standing.

Aurelia let her fingertips trail over Daphne’s cheek as they parted.

The half-blood regarded the sleeping paladin with a smirk.

Elves slept far less than humans, with half-bloods somewhere between. Still, they did need sleep, and Mal was likely exhausted from worrying about her mother. It had ended with Mal’s head down on top of Severan’s desk, Aurelia’s copy of Iolias’s travels unfurled beneath her. The elf’s dark hair was down, instead of in the typical braid as Aurelia and most of the martial persuasion preferred.

She found it endearing that Malindria seemed to like her favorite story of myth and legend. Discarding a notion to startle the paladin, she decided to be a kinder sibling and instead walked up to where the elf slept quietly and leaned over it. Aurelia let one hand rub up and down her sibling’s back to help rouse her, “Hey, Mal, wake up.”

“Nnng?” The paladin started to blink and push up, “Eh?”

“It’s your sister. Wake up.”

It took a moment as Mal’s eyes focused on Aurelia, “Oh. Hello. Was I asleep?”

“Yes. You must’ve been tired.”

Mal gave a huge yawn and stretched. Creaking noises came from her, followed by her giving a tired smile, “I haven’t bothered to sleep the last few

nights at all. Guess I finally passed out while I waited.” She nudged the open scroll, “I tried to keep myself occupied.”

“I can see. Mother is away, out of the city. Before I came back, the Coalition camp was full of torches, looked to be ready to be on the move.”

“Oh, thank the Goddess and Her Son,” Mal breathed out. “Finally, this war can be over.”

“Trust me, that’s what I want too...” Relly gave her sister a sad smile, “You know, I would like to go somewhere *other* than Noctus at least once in my life.”

“I honestly want that for you, too.” She ran a hand over the scroll to smooth it out before beginning to roll the story back up. “This is as good as I remember it. It’s well-worn, so I’m assuming it’s seen a lot of reading.”

Reaching out, letting her fingertips trail over the wooden scroll dowel, Aurelia gave a soft smile. “I read it over and over and over again. It helped me escape my step-mother.”

“Question of the ages, was *lolas* human or elf?”

Aurelia was puzzled, giving her sister an odd look, “Human, of course. He was one of the founders of Ilium. It’s how the empire got so rich so fast, access to the Broken Isles. Spices, silks, on and on. The Armada’s flagship is always named *lolas*.”

“Ahh, but didn’t Daphne, not Andy’s Daphne, wait thirty years for him to get home, yet still be able to bear him more sons? A human woman would’ve been in her late forties or fifties.”

“It’s a fable, Mal. Even if *lolas* was real, and the Empire’s position is that he was, there’s a lot of liberties taken from that long ago...”

“And it was nearly fifty years, supposedly, after getting home and having more sons and daughters, that he went to Calexis and founded the Imperial capital.” Mal nudged her sister very gently, “The Temple in the Ivory City has always maintained he was really an elf, or at least a half-blood. I think

he was half-blooded. That the people of our tribes mixed far, far more than we do even now back then. Imagine, your hero being just like you.”

“It’s a nice daydream,” sighed Aurelia. It was not the first time she had wondered what lolias would look like with pointed tips to his ears, but her father had been alive the last time she had dared to dream something like that. She shifted, then settled on the edge of the heavy desk.

“Relly?”

“Yes?”

“Why do you smell like char and soot?”

Aurelia gave a wan smile, “I felt it was important to show myself what I had done. I walked home through the western district after spending time with Antonius.”

“I can respect that. How did the time with your gentleman go?”

A flush crept into Aurelia’s cheek, and she looked away, but not fast enough to defeat the smirk on her sister’s face, “Fine. Fine.”

“Uh, huh. That’s the stink hiding under the smell of charcoal.”

“A pox on your sense of smell,” Aurelia cursed without much heart behind it.

Mal giggled softly, “It’s sweet. I’m happy for you.” Her expression sobered, “As many years as you could have with him, and I hope there are many, have you thought at all about how you’re going to handle outliving him? And any children he gives you?”

“Lady’s Breath, you’re the second person in the last hour to approach the same issue, but from a different direction.”

“You need to think about it, Aurelia. You’ll live for four, if not five centuries. I know in the now, at this moment, you’ve been able to live the short life of a human, but... you don’t look like the twenty-nine you are.”

Aurelia gave her sister a sour look, “So I keep getting told.”

“I mean, the light scars help, as does your strong build and height... but folks are going to start figuring it out. When you’re forty, it’ll be glaringly obvious.”

“I could argue that I’m a quarter...”

“I had Andy show me Julia’s portrait because I was curious. That canary, as Mother calls her, had not a drop of elven blood in her.”

A snort was forced out of Aurelia. She failed to suppress the grin that followed as well, “No, that bitch certainly did not. Daphne said I should have a child. Use that as an excuse to retire.”

Mal rested an elbow on the desk and held her chin in her hand, “Smart. Still a falsehood, so you know my opinion on it, but smart. Do you want my opinion?”

Aurelia considered her sister for a moment, about to throw some bit of snark, but stopped herself. She was actually curious what Malindria thought, so asked.

“I think,” Mal started, looking pleased that she had been asked, “... that you should change how it works.”

“Okay, what do you mean?”

“Remember how Mother said she thought you would be safe to be free because Severan Constantus could make the world tremble?”

Aurelia shrugged, “Sure. But my father, for all his skill and ability, still died on the breach. Murdered. Personally, I thought it was more about her alluding to wanting to sleep with him.”

Mal scoffed and waved a hand, “No, I mean yes, it was, but no. Do what she expected your father to do. Nearly did when he tried to sign that peace treaty and end the Toll, which would have begun the process of killing slavery in Noctus at least.”

“If I could wave a hand and say it was done? Of course, I’d end bondage and the war itself. All the way to Calexis itself, if I could.” She sighed, “I’m just one woman.”

“And Iolias was just a man,” Mal countered. “Your greatest sin that I’ve seen is that in your fear of discovery, you allow yourself to be so much lesser than your father. You should be striving to grow beyond him, as I must of my own parents.”

Aurelia scowled at her sister, irritation blooming within her, “What is it? Because I have elven blood in me, I should be so much greater than him? Is that the implication?”

“No, Relly, I...”

“... that my father was somehow a lesser being due to his weak blood?”

“Lady’s Breath, Relly, that is not what I meant, and you know it!”

“Then am I about to receive an education?” snapped the half-blood. “What does a knife-ear know about Severan Constantus other than how good he was at killing them?”

Aurelia regretted it even quicker than some of the other things she had let out of her mouth recently. Watching the hurt and pain flare across Malindria’s features whipped the contrition into her heart as quickly as it ripped the irritation from her.

Screwing herself up, Malindria stood. The chair was pushed back with a screech that set teeth on edge. Tears formed at the edge of her eyes, but she remained resolute, “I am not some wilting lily that will flee at a harsh word, sister. I do not know what nerve I tripped to force you to lash out, but I will remind you that your ears are only round because you mutilate yourself.”

Whatever fight was left in Aurelia was taken out with that last statement about her own ears. She had to admit her sibling was right, and she looked

down at her lap, “I’m... I’m sorry. It was what you said about Father, it... I... Just. Fuck. I’m sorry.”

“Relly... Aurelia... I am as well. My words were poorly conceived, but I swear I meant well by you and the man you clearly love so dearly.” Mal reached out tentatively and cupped her sibling’s cheek. “Even if we stood opposite on a battlefield once, I am not your enemy any longer. Your willingness to set aside rivalry and faction, you did that. I cannot imagine a single other in either of our Orders able to do the same. Not even I, that first night.”

Relly chuckled softly, a hint of a smile dawning, as she remembered the first time they had seen each other’s faces, “That was a pretty good right hook.”

Mal rolled her eyes and pulled her hand away to cup her own jaw, “I think you cracked a tooth. It hurts when I drink something too hot or cold now.”

“Talk to Andy, he’ll know what to do.”

“That’s how you do things, isn’t it? A bit of pain now to save more later. Slug a sister to save her life. Burn down part of a city to save an army.”

Aurelia considered for a moment, “It’s becoming my signature, it seems.” She then smirked at her sibling, “Point out a sister’s insecurity to force her to stop raging and accept reality.”

“We *are* sisters, I can do it, too.”

“It’s still surreal to me... an elf *and* a paladin.”

Mal smirked, “Me as well. Then I catch the faint cast of Mother’s face in yours when you turn your head, or I spot the mark on your chin. It’s subtle, but there. Your father contributed far more to you.”

“Good thing you look so much like her.”

Standing and turning to sit perched on the desk just like Aurelia, Malindria smiled, “I suppose so. It shames me to admit; you could’ve killed me. You’re a better swordswoman than I.”

Relly winked, letting the teasing remain obvious with her tone, “Our training has to be better, as most Bloody Saints don’t have centuries to practice.”

Malindria leaned over, letting her shoulder rest again Aurelia’s, “Be truthful with me. Are you sanguine that I am your sibling? Are you willing to be such through all the trials and travails that come with having a knife-eared blowhard as your blood?”

“Knife-eared blowhard? Are you referring to yourself or Mother?”

That earned a giggle from the paladin, “You know damn well what I mean.”

“Against my better judgment, Mal, I like you. You’ve also earned glowing marks from Andolius, and that means a lot to me, in fact.” Relly ruffled the other woman’s hair gently, “I can only hope you’d be honest in turn, and tell me if I’ve earned similar regard.”

“I...” Mal hesitated as she straightened her hair out, then started, “I felt sorry for you, at first. Hold on, don’t give me that look. Whether it was being stuck living in this city, being so utterly isolated that I felt you had to buy friends and then...” A sour expression came to her features, “... to my eternal shame, I felt sorry you had human blood.”

“I’m hoping that this is leading to an admission,” Relly kept her tone soft. “Otherwise, you would just end up sounding like the reverse of what gets thrown about in the Basilica on Lady’s Day.”

“What I mean to say both now and earlier is I think, if you dedicate yourself to it, you can be your father’s equal.”

“I... thank you. I will take that as the compliment it is clearly meant.”

“Good. For my part, as long as you stay true to who you are, I plan on loving you as a sister should. You have put the thing I know you hold most dear, your father’s legacy, on the line to help Mother save tens of

thousands of strangers who would have only ever brought you harm. Nalandiel favors such faithful selflessness. You're not even one of my Order, yet you have served its tenants far more faithfully than my own father did." To illustrate her words, Mal turned and wrapped her sibling up in a tight hug.

Relly squeezed back in return, smiling against the dark curtain of her sister's hair where she had nestled, "Then the negotiations can start. Stop rewarding the dread goddess with all this horror and death and do what Her Son would want."

Chapter 12

Withdrawal

Courage must be dosed with wisdom, for that is the knife's edge upon which our blessed Lady's virtues must balance. To withdraw from unfavorable terrain is not cowardice, just as throwing lives away blithely in foolish bravado is not valor. – Canon of the Lady, Chapter 5, Verse 13

Valor rushed between retreating columns of Coalition troops.

As the last to withdraw, the Galand made up the bulk of the rearguard. There had been skirmishes with Imperial outriders and auxilia all day. Laggardly regiments or racing cavalry kept nerves frazzled and tensions high. More than once, it led elven soldiers to call out in annoyance at the white charger as he passed, two women crouched upon his saddle, and his barding long discarded.

“General Hathilan!” Lily called out, having finally spotted her target. Kell perked up, but had no purchase to look over the taller woman’s shoulder to see what her companion saw.

The elven general was flanked by a pair of bodyguards from the Lady’s Guard, all three on their own mounts. Both turned to regard the spy guilelessly, no hint of the malice seen by Theonar’s pet oathbreakers. Their arms and armor still earned them a dark look from Lilandria as she slowed Valor to a slow trot alongside the general.

Hathilan looked much like his royal cousin. Tall, handsome, with long dark locks and green eyes. Late middle-age was just starting to tell on his features, some agelessness giving way to a sterner countenance and some scars that had just not quite completely vanished as they would in youth. His look was dour, “Caulithil. I hear you’re the one I have to thank for... well... a lot of things.”

“Sir! We have so much you need to hear...!” Both Lily and Kell started at the same time, phrasing nearly identical.

Giving the young sea elf an unamused look, the general ordered her, “Let the spy talk, ensign.”

“Yes, sir,” murmured Kell before descending into sullen silence.

“Sir, our cousin, the king...”

“Former.”

“Former king, yes, sir, I...” Lilandria launched into a rushed tirade that explained what had happened before dawn in the tent, prior to the full retreat having been called. A hefty amount was left out, especially the part about admitting to being Aurelia Constantus’s mother.

After the entire story had been laid out, the general gave an amused snort. “Well, then, it sounds like the Imperials and Theonar deserve each other if what you’re saying is true.”

“It is. We have to...” Lilandria hesitated, flustered, having not gotten beyond giving the general a warning when it came to the planning stage.

“Have to what, Caulithil? Warn them? Go send a runner back so that man can get clapped into chains for the temerity to do the right thing?” A sharp bark of a laugh escaped him, “I’ve lost enough elves in rearguard combat today to Theonar’s procrastination before I could order the march. I’ll take every dead Imperial I can get and thank the Lady for each of them. Fewer of them to fight at Caer Galand when we get there.”

“Sir, whatever madness Theonar plans...”

“... pales in comparison to the might of six legions and the garrison. Let some Bloody Saints get murdered killing the bastard. He’s not my problem anymore. Once the gates of Caer Galand slam shut, this whole bloody war won’t be my fucking problem anymore.” The general swapped to Dwarvish for the curse word that he used, a low guttural thing that only the infernal tongue of the Nephilim could rival.

When Lily did not immediately respond, the general added, “Ride ahead or scout behind. I care not, Caulithil. You’ve done your duty, but knowing you, you had reasons beyond helping this nation. You’ve always been a self-interested shit. My condolences about your husband and daughter. Them, I will mourn.” He whipped his horse to speed up and trot away from the spy, guards in tow.

“He has your measure,” Kell observed softly.

“I may have to admit I’m not as subtle as I thought I had been through the years,” groused Lilandria.

“Lady’s Breath, Lily, maybe the takeaway is to be a better person, not lie better.”

“Now you’re just sounding like Malindria.”

Kell poked her companion lightly in the side, “Stop with the flattery.”

Ignoring the prodding, Lilandria instead switched to her real focus, “We have to warn my daughters somehow what Theonar is up to.”

“There are six legions, plus a city between us and them!”

“Perhaps a boat...?”

“The entire Imperial Armada commands the seas!”

“I could use Aurelia’s name...”

“And obliterate her charade!”

Lily turned partially and glowered at Kell, “You are just ruining any concept that we can aid my daughters with... with...”

“Reality?”

“Yes!”

“How in the Hells did you convince anyone, let alone masters of two different knightly Orders, that you’d be worth the hassle of bedding?” the sea elf shot back.

Lily shrugged and, in a moment of candor, admitted, “I’m gorgeous and fun to lay with.”

Kell’s response was to roll her eyes again, “Nalandiel above, save me. You are going to be the worst mother-in-law ever.” She poked at Lily’s side again, “Is there anything you can think of that’s not awful and counterproductive?”

Both women sat still upon Valor and pondered, troops marching past the pair of them in sullen ranks. Lily’s fingers drummed on the horn of the leather saddle before she admitted, “I’d have to admit I lied to my daughters.”

“Of course you did. What was all the talk about being better to them?”

Lily shrugged, “I don’t even know why I lied. I... it’s actually a problem. Severan and I had a speaking trinket we shared. They belonged to a handler I...” She eyed Kell, then admitted, “... murdered for his sake. I took one home with me and used the scroll to talk to my beloved.”

“So, what’s the lie? And, to be honest, I’m not even sure what part of what you said was truth.”

“All of it! I... I told them I destroyed my half of the scroll, the one that let me write what I wanted to Severan. I didn’t. I never would do something like that. I’d’ve sooner slit Rotheran’s throat if he found it than destroy something with my beloved’s words on it. I... I don’t know why I told her I did that.” She scowled deeply.

“Lily, you lie so much it’s muscle memory after this many centuries. You need to be honest, truly honest, for a long while before even you can trust your own words.”

Lilandria ignored her companion as she ruminated, “Maybe it’s due to how it works. My words fade from the paper and appear on the opposite one, meaning they cannot see what he wrote me, only I have those words...”

“You wanted to possess them. That’s not an admirable quality, Lily.” More poking ensued as Kell attempted to regain the other woman’s attention.

“I... I know. However, it also means that Aurelia won’t be checking the scroll for me to write to her. She thinks it’s inert and just a relic without its companion piece.”

Kellintil groaned in frustration, “Lady’s Breath, Lily. Why’d you lie?”

Lilandria blinked a handful of times as she went silent. Eventually, she croaked out, “I don’t know.”

“It’d be really helpful if you hadn’t. You could just tell your daughters everything that happened with Theonar.”

“I mean, I can still go home, write... maybe they’ll look at it.”

“Maybe. We’re reduced to a maybe because you can’t stop fucking lying!” Kell assailed the other woman with her small fists, pounding them into Lily’s back.

Ignoring the impacts, soft sniffs came from the older elf, “I’m sorry, Kell... I... truly I am. In this moment, I wish I wasn’t the way I am.”

Kell relented and sighed, leaning her head against Lily’s back, “In this moment, I believe you are truly repentant, Lily. Then, tomorrow, you’ll have moved on and be back to your old ways. Please, I beg you, stop lying.”

“Maybe you can be my conscience, if you are willing.”

The sea elf regarded her future mother-in-law with a raised brow, “That’d be a whole career in itself.”

“I know, but there are few I’d trust to do it. You, Mal, Relly, my boys... and my boys don’t like me enough already.”

“I thought they were ‘very independent’ and ‘kept their distance’?”

Lily snorted, “You’ll be surprised by this, but I lied. They hate me. They visit to see their sister and father.”

“Shocking. I also doubt they’re going to take Rotheran’s death well.”

Fidgeting for a moment, Lily admitted, “Unlikely. But, here I am, I had my girls, and I left them both again, at their request, to do what I am doing now.”

“Lily, if I agree to hold your leash, you best answer when I yank it. Otherwise, the moment Mal is out of that city and back home, I will drag her away from you and never let you see her again – this sister, too, if I can manage it.”

“It’s yours, Kell. Call me to account when I fail, please.”

Leaning forward, Kell wrapped both arms around the older woman again and squeezed her tightly, “If I didn’t see some vague notion of you trying to improve, I wouldn’t do this. You gave me the woman I love beyond measure, so I am willing to try for her.”

Lily let herself press back and into the young elf’s embrace. “Thank you. Mal makes me want to try. She’s... Lady’s Breath... she truly is the best of us.” A soft sight came from her, “Please believe I love you, Kellintil Foamfollower. That is the truth.”

“I do, Lily. When you’re not being a shit, I even love you back.” She released the other elf from the embrace, then said, “Let’s go to your home, get your speaking trinket, and pray we can contact your daughters.”

Nodding, Lily gave a light whip to Valor’s reins, and the stallion surged forward. They hurried past the ranks and files of disillusioned elven troops, all hoping to make it home before the possibility was lost to them.

Noctus had erupted into cheers and celebration.

Low disquiet had pervaded since the immolation of the Foundry District, but on awaking during a late summer morning to find the Coalition camp utterly abandoned, the city's mood had transformed. Men and women flooded the streets of the remaining quarters of Noctus, cheering and celebrating. Food carts and stall merchants hawked their wares, from grilled bits of questionable meat to sticky sweets that left a residue behind on any fingers unfortunate enough to touch them.

Children raced underfoot, pretending to be knights or legionaries, and chasing away knife ears, stunties, and the odd parent acting as a giant. Street preachers cried out about the holy virtues of the Empire, and how impurity had been defeated by steadfast devotion to the Lady and Her Son.

Armed and armored in the panoply of her trade, Aurelia pushed through the crowds. For once, the mob did not either ignore her or part for her path, but pushed forward. Fingers caressed her armor, and lips sought her cheeks. One ardent suitor had a tooth knocked free when he made the attempt to cover Aurelia's lips with his own. Her white hood was tugged up and over her head to hide the shock of red hair among the usual dark or blonde colors of the Noctans, leaving her hunched against the press as she shouldered forward.

Weaving through the mill and grind of humanity (to which she also attributed half-bloods), Aurelia spent far longer than she would have hoped to get to the wall. Legionaries saluted dutifully as she stepped past them and ascended. She needed to see with her own eyes what had happened and how successful her mother's warning had been for the Coalition.

Her mind raced with what reaction she should construct for the pantomime of who she was. Would the Knight-Captain look stern or joyous? Would she be ribald or devout? It was a thing she never used to think about, to just

play along. What had happened since the Battle of the Trade Gate had made her hate the falseness even more than she already did. Instead, she had felt none of the celebratory nature, only having deepened the dread of discovery.

Before Malindria, before even her mother, the worst punishment she could have suffered for being who she was was censure and ejection from the Order. Paying her bond off was always minimal; she still had enough, even after Julia's considerable efforts to waste the inheritance her father left her, more embarrassment than anything else. There would be grousing, hemming, and hawing about how Severan had failed them, but the Empire needed the legend of him almost as much as Aurelia did. She could have even joined the Nineteenth, been a Centurion, which was the highest rank a half-blood was allowed.

Now, though, should the full account of what happened come to light, Aurelia could hang from the city walls, a rope around her neck. That her sister could swing next to her, at risk for as long as she remained within the city, only quickened her pulse with even more dread and anxiety.

Traitor, they would call her.

All those who could not profit from misery and cruelty, all of which demanded her allegiance. While families would be allowed to know their loved ones were coming home safely, both Imperial and Coalition troops alike. All she had ever wanted, since she could remember wanting anything, was the war to be over. Then later, to never let another family hear their father was not coming home because of the stupid, senseless killing.

If there was any part of her father's legacy that she valued more than anything else, it was that desire.

“Was she pretty, Papa?”

Warmth filled his features as Severan smiled down at his daughter, “Of course. Almost as pretty as you.” He winked at her.

The seven-year-old Relly looked up at her father from his knee, eyes wide. Her copper locks hung loose around her, and the green child’s dress she wore, “I can see her when the war’s over?”

“Yes, my beloved ruby, we’ll see your Mama, and she can tell you how much she loves you herself.”

Relly smiled prettily and kicked her bare feet. She clutched a wooden carving of Iolias’s ship, the *Venture*, in her hands. Calthus, old enough he knew a little of this and that about everything, had carved it for her and gifted it to her that morning, her naming day anniversary. “If she does not, I will be very cross with her.”

Severan let out the low rumble of a chuckle, “Oh my, do you even know what that means?”

“It means mad!”

“So it does.”

“Papa?”

“Yes, beloved?”

“Why is there a war? Why are people hurting each other?” asked the young girl guilelessly.

Severan gave her a sad smile. “Because of some foolish decisions old men made a long time ago. Now, because of pride, two different groups can’t admit where they are wrong, and make an agreement in the middle that helps both sides move past those mistakes.”

Relly blinked up at her father, comprehension eluding the young girl, “Are we wrong, Papa?”

“In some ways, we are. They’re right about bondage and slavery, that should go away.”

Tugging at the pointed tip of an ear, Relly said softly, “Half-bloods are nice. They should be free.”

“I agree, Ruby,” Severan kissed the crown of his daughter’s head, “So should elves and dwarves and everyone else. But that’s not my decision to make, that’s the Senate’s, and too many people have pride and money locked up in keeping it so.”

“Then you should make the Sehn-nut change the rule!”

Severan laughed, “I agree. I’ll try my best, I promise.”

“But if we’re wrong, why not let the Koh-li-shun in, Papa? Let them be in charge?”

His features turned dark as he looked across the foyer, where they sat, a small pile of unwrapped presents for Relly’s naming day scattered about from her play. “We’ve been besieged for two years, beloved. Cities that hold out don’t get taken kindly. It’s too late at this point. Even if the Coalition tried, they couldn’t stop what’s coming. Noctus burns come the day the walls fall, and I will *not* allow the people I love to suffer that fate.”

Not comprehending the true depths of what he meant, Relly sniffled, “I don’t wan’ Calthus to get hurt.”

Severan’s smile returned, warm and gentle, “No, sweetie, not in a thousand thousand years do we let that happen.”

The little girl gave a serious nod, her features as stern as she could make them in a green dress while clutching a toy boat, “And I’ll be a knight like my Papa, and we’ll make sure no one ever hurts another half-blood.”

“You would make a remarkable knight, my beloved.”

Lucilla, Tertius, and Vespasian greeted Aurelia when she emerged upon the wall. The trio were jovial, laughing and nudging each other as they pointed out towards where the Coalition had once been encamped.

It was Lucilla who spotted Aurelia first. “Mum!” Her freckle-spattered face split into a grin, her dull, straw-colored hair braided up and then rolled into the same bun that Aurelia typically wore.

“Sers,” greeting Aurelia stiffly, having decided to discard celebration in favor of a sterner countenance.

Clinging to her captain, Lucilla grabbed hold of Aurelia’s paudron, tugging down the white hood from Aurelia’s head without invitation, “Mum! They’re gone! Your father’s dream is real!”

Aurelia sighed, not wanting to discourage the familiarity, but also not particularly in the mood for it. One gauntleted hand patted her fellow knight’s chest and she stepped free of the grasp. “So I can see.” She stepped up to the remains of a shattered crenel and looked out over the wall.

Idle siege engines and toppled tents were laid out from east to west where the Coalition’s siege lines had once been. They had left in a hurry, but all visible accounts. Anything that looked like it weighed more than a few pounds had been left behind. Looting the camp itself could take several days worth of time.

That would start at the largest of the tents. Galandir’s royal pavilion still stood proudly deep within the center of the tent city, its pennants flapping, showing the royal griffons of the nation. With how many Coalition soldiers had died, there could still be plunder in any of the tents from the number of fallen giants, Ghontish and elven knights, and everything in between.

The idle thought of which of those tents could be Malindria’s flit through Aurelia’s mind. She hoped Lily had grabbed anything of value before heading for home. Soon enough she would find out, she assumed, as she did not doubt the orders to sally out would come soon enough.

As she watched, columns of legionary maniples began to march into the camp from the west. Each had orange horse hair tassels on their helms, the bristles of their centurions and tribunes matching. Five of the Lady's swords were clearly displayed on their orange banner.

"There's the Fifth, Vespy," she tapped the large knight, then pointed.

"Aye, so it is. Ne'er gotten a chance to see the colors in person before. Thought that orange would be brighter."

"I thought there'd be more legions," groused Tertius, peering out over the battlefield from under his helm. The missing hand had been capped with a steel plate, and his shield strapped on over it, since it was his off hand.

Aurelia grunted as she considered the complaint, "They'll be chasing the Coalition, I suspect. Even with them moving out overnight, it's still going to be a race for Consul's Knot. If they get across the bridge first..."

Vespasian's nodded thoughtfully, "Then they're gone. If our lads get across first..."

"... then they're trapped," finished Aurelia. "A couple old ladies and a broom can defend that narrow bridge. In the Ghontish Wars, the Order held off the entire Ghontish army on its own there once."

"Weren't that Saint Sanguis leading us back in those days, mum?" Tertius asked.

A quick shake of her head was Aurelia's initial response, then, "No, his heir. Malachai was dead by that point."

"As mum says," Vespasian patted his own breastplate contentedly, "What a wunnerful day. Thea was even in a good mood this morning. Kissed my forehead and everything."

Lucilla snorted, "Bet she regretted that right quick. Might get a big head thinking someone likes you, you lug."

Vespy grinned toothily, “Dun worry, she slapped me right after. Wouldn’t want me getting airs.”

As the three devolved into jesting, mostly at Vespasian’s expense, Aurelia found herself unable to keep the smile off her face. It helped remind her of the reasons she loved her men so much. It reinforced what she had done. There would be no battle where the lives of these men and women she adored were put at risk, all for pride.

For a moment, it comforted her.

It was the glow that had begun at the center of the Galand royal pavilion that stole that feeling away.

“Your Highness, you had best hurry!”

One of Theonar’s oathbreakers hissed out the warning before turning to head back outside. Fewer than a thousand men and women, had remained behind to defend the king. Some were his chosen devotees, most were hapless loyalists, clueless about what the former king’s true intentions were.

“It takes time!” hissed the former monarch before turning back to the inscription he was etching into the floorboards of the tent. The structure had been erected on a platform, not just in the dirt.

One of the trio of soothsayers that always remained at the king’s side sat on their knees in the center of the vast series of runes that had been carved and whittled into the wooden boards. Infernal speech came out of the old charlatan in a stream of nearly unintelligible babble.

Putting the final touches on the inscription, the king threw his head up in supplication, “Dread goddess! Hear my plea! I give this devotee unto you! Let us hear your words, so that you may command us!”

Both remaining heretics added their voices to those of their sovereign. Sounds of struggle and steel clashing echoed from outside the tent. Whatever the Imperials had invaded the camp with had reached the outskirts of the pavilion, and the loyalists outside had engaged them. A faint hint of ozone in the air and sharp crackles of lightning revealed that Theonar still had a few mages among his retainers, even if none were of great power; it was enough to buy time.

Rising up to his feet, the central heretic bared his dagger from his belt. He screamed out in infernal, the sound of the words painful to any but the most ardent to hear, “I give myself unto thee, Lady Calumnia! My life for thine, for thou art the truth and the way!”

He plunged the naked blade into his own breast. Magic pulsed with every one of the fading beats of the man’s heart, as his life’s blood gushed out over the carefully etched runes and blasphemous scribblings. The entire tent shuddered, as if it were trying to recoil from the wrongness of the event.

Torches, unnecessary during the day, especially by elves, flared to life with a green incandescence that they should have been unable to cast. Shadows roiled and coalesced, peeling away from furniture and living being alike. They congregated upon the willing sacrifice, adhered to the skin, and suffocated the form that had once stood there.

What had replaced him was darkness. Shadows so unbreachable that only the void remained. A feminine form whose hips twitched rhythmically as it moved, wings of night unfurling behind it.

Even the mad monarch felt apprehension as he looked upon the nothingness that had been wrought before him. Fear blossomed when the creature opened its eyes. Fire burned beneath its brow and penetrated through the madman. His soothsayers screamed their gibberish as it gazed upon all of them, and unable to bear it longer, they slit their own throats, collapsing into heaps next to their blasphemy.

Theonar.

Shadow spawned horror spoke to him then. It was not words in the air, just a feeling that bore down on that little spot of blackness that was his soul. Even without the need to eat, or drink, or sleep any longer, the dead king's lips felt too dry, his voice too parched to speak. His tongue flicked out, trying to wet them, but it did no good.

You promised me so much, Theonar, now you beg.

"My lady! My beloved goddess! Please! I can still give it to you, if you just help me a bit more..." He beseeched the avatar that stood before him.

Void moved faster than thought could track, racing forward to wrap Theonar's throat in a grip that belied even the might of a giant. He was effortlessly pulled up from the floor and dangled. Eyes of flame tore through him to lay bare the egotistical spite that was at the core of his soul.

I was promised the souls of a city. I was promised so much more than that afterwards. You do not even fathom what you are keeping from me with your petty failures.

Magics that held death at bay wavered and weakened. Pain flared through Theonar's ribcage where the elven assassin had stabbed him. His throat felt like it was being crushed, but he squawked out, "You need me as much as I need you! Just aid me... give me what I need... and you'll have it!"

Calumnia's avatar dropped her puppet to the floor, the power of deathlessness returning to banish his ailments and his aches.

She is heavy with child, Theonar. Do you understand what I can do with hundreds of thousands of souls? I can turn that womb to rot and disease. I will sacrifice those gods on the altar of my ascension.

Clutching at his throat, a phantom pain still throbbing, Theonar croaked, "The new gods? But... I thought... is that not heresy?"

Lacquer splintered off the tentpoles, and banners shredded apart with the sound of the shadow thing's laughter. Even a Nephilim would struggle to withstand the sound of it.

The church hung Her prophet, they do not know they strung up their own salvation. Give me those souls, and I will finally be free of Her, no longer tied to that mourning, simpering cow. I will be myself. Divine flesh and blood and no longer Her fucking shadow.

"T-tell me how to make it happen, my Lady! My queen!" begged the monarch as the clashes outside grew louder, more insistent.

Calumnia stalked forward, the shadows peeling back from the head of the avatar to show a face. A dark mirror of the Lady Ilia, serenity, grace, and wisdom contorted into beautiful cruelty and malice. It was an illusion of what flesh might be should the dread goddess gain it.

Repeat these words, and do not alter them.

Infernal speech filled the tent as the king repeated what the avatar of the dread goddess had laid out before him. As the shadow fled, it left the withered corpse of the blasphemous prophet on the floorboards. His flesh had been seared and burned away, the corpse unable to withstand such power within it for long. Its bones collapsed within the sack that had been its skin, and it dissolved as Theonar chanted.

When the first of the Fifth Legion's soldiers crashed through one of the pavilion's flaps to see what lay within, he never did comprehend what he was witnessing before he died.

The last of the Coalition column was filtering over the bridge at the Consul's Knot. North was the singular stretch of road that led to Noctus, south the crossroads that had been given the name where you could travel deeper

into the former Treaty Lands of the Imperial enclave, or towards Caer Galand or Caer Aldwell, the elvish and Ghontish border fortresses.

Caer Aldwell had been Imperial built, long ago, but had been lost to them in the continuous wars the Empire had fought with the men of the Ghont over the centuries. It had been reinforced a dozen times over since Severan Constantus had taken it two years before the beginning of the siege of Noctus.

Lily smirked as she remembered that moment, and opening the postern to let him and several dozen Order knights in. They had slaughtered a chunk of the garrison before Severan was able to open the gates. It had been one of her prouder moments, and one that she was the last living person to know about.

Glancing back at the bridge, Lily eyed the last remaining rearguard. A small regiment of still noble paladins protected a narrow ribbon of an arch, built to be easily defended so that the Imperial toll takers would have little difficulty in coercing a payment. It had all the hallmarks of Imperial construction. As something of human make, it still seemed to last forever, always seemed to include an arch somewhere, and was made of whatever stone was nearest. In this situation, it was made of the same basalt as Noctus's walls.

She was under no illusion that any of those men and women would ever make it home to Galandir. Knowing she should feel dismay about this, or some form of sympathy, she was instead certain she was entirely done with paladins. Lily planned on asking – perhaps begging – her daughter to resign from whatever hollow shell of the order was left. The only ones still alive would be those guarding the temples and fanes back home in Galandir after this war was over by her estimation.

“Lily, why are we tarrying?” Kell asked, still perched behind her on Valor's saddle.

“Even at a hard ride, it’d be ten days to my family’s manor. While I wish to warn my daughters, I also wish Valor to live through the attempt to get home, and know quite a few events will play out without our input by then.”

At hearing his name, the stallion huffed and cantered.

“That’s right, my handsome man,” Lily leaned forward and gently petted the beast, using a soft, soothing tone as she spoke. The horse made a contented noise.

Kell eyed her companion, “You know, maybe you should stick to horses for a while.”

“I might. My misadventures with men are... well... the stuff of legends at this point.” She grinned and turned partway to look at Kell, “Though, if you have any cute male cousins.”

“No.” The look Kell gave the high elf could have curdled milk.

Lily rolled her eyes, “I’m teasing. I am not even slightly interested, plus there’s the proscribed mourning period for Rothy.”

“You should, you know, try to mourn him. It might do you good. It might do your relationship with your children some good,” pointed out the younger elf.

“You’re probably right, but since we’re being brazenly honest, I don’t plan on mourning the man who ordered one of my daughters to kill the other, and before that ordered his men to kill the man I was actually in love with.” Lily raised a brow at Kell, as if challenging her to rebut the statement.

“I... uh... wait, he did that?”

Lily nodded slowly, “He did. Bid Mal to kill her sister. Does that make it clearer why I’m livid with him?”

Kell sighed gently, “It does, yes.

Letting her expression soften, Lily added, “But the thought behind the words makes sense. I will endeavor to treat Rotheran kindly around my

boys, as they loved him dearly, even though I will tell them the truth about the flaws that our relationship had.”

“Better. I’m not asking you to improve instantly, but to shift towards... well...”

“... empathy and honesty?”

“Yes!” Kellintil beamed, “It gives me something to focus on. Not as if I haven’t also lost family of late.”

“The fleet. I can’t imagine how many cousins and family you lost, dear Kell. I truly am sorry about that.” Lily even sounded sincere to herself when she said it. In her own heart, she did not believe she ever wanted Kell to suffer. By her standards, she adored the young woman.

Kell’s smile faltered for a moment, “Accepted, thank you.” She glanced back at the rear guard of church knights. Their faces grim, their fates well known to them against the onrushing Imperial pursuit. “I just wish the dying would stop.”

“Soon enough, the worst of it is behind us I –”

Power thrummed through the air. Horses and beasts of burden whined as birds took flight from any nearby perch, fleeing westwards. Elven senses screamed at them that something was amiss. Even desultory infantry paused mid-march, their officers giving wary looks to the countryside.

To their credit, the paladins began to pull their holy symbols of Nalandiel, a bronze trinket shaped like His shield, free from their belts and murmur in combined prayers. They had felt it like all the others.

“Something’s wrong, Lily,” Kell whimpered. “I... it feels like there’s a pit in my gut.”

Stormclouds appeared from nowhere, racing in from over the Sea of Scales towards the east, where Noctus lay. Their color was off, wrong. Green lightning arced between the forming thunderheads, shattering any hope that whatever had occurred was natural.

Earth cracked and roiled all around the Galand column, sending spearmen and men-at-arms staggering out of their formations. Valor cantered, and it took all of Lily's knowledge as a rider to prevent herself and Kellintil from being thrown, as even the stallion's training as a destrier failed him. He was deathly afraid, and snorted loudly in protestation of not being allowed to gallop away free of burden.

"Theonar, you fucking fool, what have you done? We need to go," Lily declared and snapped the reins, loosening any impediment to Valor's retreat. The beast needed little urging, and it stormed past the startled elven foot troops.

Twisted shapes birthed themselves from the ground in every direction around the elven army. Rotted, tattered remnants of armor and uniforms covered the decrepit creations of nightmare. Elven mithril, Ghontish chain, and even the odd legionary hauberk or Order knight's plate adorned them, worn by age and time.

Mithril sang as Lily pulled the sword she stole from Theonar's dead bodyguard from her daughter's scabbard. Momentum and keen elven craftsmanship took it through one of the abominations, cutting the thing in half through the chest. Valor bore the next down, crushing it flat beneath his powerful hooves.

More and more erupted from the earth. Dead men and women, Imperial and Elf alike, tearing at the ground to stand once more in their deathless state. Where flesh had failed and fallen completely, skeletons were held together by nothing but the will of the Dread Goddess herself, clutching at weapons more rust than steel.

They hemmed in the attempt at retreat, surrounding the army and growing so thick Valor's speed and power found him having to draw up short. Lily yanked the reins hard to one side when he refused to jump over a thicket of former legionaries, only to have to retreat back to where General Hathilan was attempting to do his best to form something resembling a defensive square.

Valor galloped towards the officer and his command, and Lily screamed at him, “The bridge! We hold both ends still!”

Hathilan nodded, having little time to argue and seeing the wisdom in it. Without flanks, they would only be pressed on two sides. He shouted the order, and the horns sounded the note. What remained of Galandir’s once mighty army bolted for the slender Imperial structure and the small bit of safety it promised.

A battlefield that had seen conflict after conflict through the centuries had vomited forth its dead. They screamed their hatred of the living and barreled towards the retreating elven army.

Epilogue

Nightfall

Lo, the new gods come, but in their birth, the pains of our Blessed Lady shall be great. Cling to each other and your love of Her, as She will cling to each of us for our prayer and veneration. Before the dawn, there must be a night, and weeping shall threaten to consume this world. When the great bells toll, Calumnia shall make her final attempt to secure her freedom, and she will walk freely upon the surface of Caldraut to give birth to horrors undreamed of. The living will envy the dead. – Revelations of Sextus Aquillius, Chapter 5, Verse 16, the “New Canon”, published shortly before he was hung for blasphemy.

Aurelia could feel the walls of Noctus shudder as power pulsed from the center of the Coalition camp.

Black storm clouds and thunderheads coalesced from nothing, swirling and piling together directly overhead from where the royal pavilion stood. Another pulse thrummed through the air as Aurelia grabbed hold of the half-shattered crenel in front of her, desperate to keep her footing. Far down the wall, a Blackshield stumbled and then dropped to his doom to the cobbles below.

“Mum!” Vespasian called, all cheer and jubilation gone as he unlatched his helm from his belt and secured it properly on his head, slamming the visor shut. Even human senses could not deny the wrongness.

“What in Calumia’s rotten fucking gash is this?” snarled out the half-blood knight as she gripped the wall with one gauntlet, the other firmly around Defiance’s hilt.

Between the wall and the camp, whatever had happened had sent the entirety of the Imperial Fifth Legion to the deck. It had flattened them to the dirt, and they were only just starting to peel themselves back up. Their motions were off, jerky. Aurelia did not think anyone else had seen it from so far, but she had. Peering forward, she was not certain, so she raced along the wall towards the remains of the Trade Gate, where she knew Antony would be garrisoned.

“Antony!” His black bristle helped him stand out among his men, the whole point of the adornment on his helm, she called. “Give me your spyglass!”

He did not argue, only nodded as he produced the contraption and handed it over. Aurelia extended it and got a good look herself at what had happened to the men and women of the Fifth. White filmed their eyes, as if cataracts had taken them over. They moved without rank or file, shambling slowly, and they had ceased advancing towards the pavilion, but instead had turned towards Noctus.

“Aurelia,” the Tribune’s voice as low as he could let it be and still be heard, “Tell me what’s wrong?”

“I don’t know,” she whispered as she handed the glass back to its owner, “But those aren’t our men anymore.”

All around the Coalition camp, the ground had begun to split. Things were beginning to peel their way out from between the cracks in the earth. Death had surrounded Noctus for decades, filling its cemeteries, its sewers, and the waters that abutted it. With the immolation of an entire district, the city itself had become a mass grave.

Realizing this, Aurelia turned to look at the still smoldering Foundry District. Things roused themselves within it, clawing their way free from the charnel pit that it had become. Pale bodies dragged their way up onto the docks and the ships of the Armada, the corpses of those lost to vast naval engagements of the ebb and flow of the constant war.

The dead had returned to Noctus to repay the slaughter.

In the ancient halls of the Ivory City, mausoleums broke open to vomit forth their contents. Ancient revenants in dulled mithril clove their way through the populace of artists and musicians, soft lifestyles providing little resistance to unthinking malice.

Along the great vias of Calexis, the vascular system of an empire, slaves tore their way free from their crucifixions and shambled towards the city they had marched upon in life. Mass graves opened up, and murdered slaves once again stood to take vengeance upon their former masters.

In the lands of the Ghont, cemeteries spat up their residents, and townships were invaded; peasants fled towards the manors and estates of their lords.

Dwarves and Gnomes interrupted their eternal struggle against the orc clans to battle against their own ancestors, demanding Murdran, their divine father, finally cease his eternal sulking to help them, or they would be done with the bastard.

Even the orc clans found themselves in sudden retreat, unable to comprehend what was happening to them as they returned to their holdfasts deep within the mountain valleys. They cursed Calumnia, who they had long worshipped, for her capricious betrayal.

So few giants had returned to Dun Moroch that the dead outnumbered them in such numbers that they could only flee the mountain fastness and seek refuge with their eternal rivals below Mount Thumnir with the dwarves.

Twenty-five years of siege.

Twenty-five years of death, war, destruction, and annihilation.

It all ripped its way free of the dirt, of the water, of the ashes of Noctus, and hurled itself at the City of Chains.

As death itself raced towards the city, the great bells of the Black Fortress began to toll. Every shrine and fane within Noctus joined them, the Basilica's own chimes crying their warning. Across Caldraut, the holy places of the Lady and Her Son wept for their children, their bells all tolling in unison.