

**HEART
SHADOWS**

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For my kids

FRAGMENTS

1

The Discipliner's open palm connected with her jaw, and her fingernails dug deeper into the soft wood of the chair as she braced for the next blow. A whimper threatened to escape from her throat, but she ground her teeth against the pain and stubbornly stared fire in the man's direction, ignoring the unpleasant tingle from his repeated blows to her face. He glared back with an intensity that would make most children cower, but she did not know fear. He had purged her of that long ago.

"What have I told you about respect, Elizabeth?" the Discipliner asked.

"What have I told you about calling me Elizabeth?" she retorted, and earned another hard slap across the face.

"Insolent girl," the Discipliner spat. "I'll never break you of that pride. You have failed in almost every area where the other children succeed. Strength. Bravery. Obedience."

"Weakness!" she said, eyes flashing defiantly. "They aren't strong or brave. They can't even think unless you tell them how."

“That’s the way all good children should be...all good soldiers. One day, if you’re lucky, you will test into the Great Army. But if not, the matron and I will sell you to the highest bidder.” He reached down and stroked her cheek, a simple gesture that scared her more than any physical abuse ever could have. “You’re going to be a beautiful woman, Elizabeth.” He sneered. “For my part, I hope you fail.”

“I’ll kill you first.”

“Don’t fool yourself. You will never be strong enough to kill a man like me.”

“Maybe not,” she grinned. “But I will be smart enough. Fast enough. One day you will be afraid of me.”

The Discipliner hissed through bared teeth and reared back to strike her again, but a hurried rap at the door made him pause. “Yes?”

“Downstairs, at once,” the matron’s voice came through muffled from the other side. “Something is happening in the streets. Soldiers on the march. Gunfire. I need you to stand watch.”

The Discipliner’s hand fell slowly—reluctantly—back to his side, “Looks like you get a pass, my dear. For now.” He moved to the door and she breathed a long sigh of relief. The Discipliner heard her, and snickered, “Just because I’m done here, girl, doesn’t mean you are. I’ll make a soldier of you yet. Computer, play beta training program.”

“No!” Liz jumped up from the chair and bolted for the door, hoping to escape as he opened it. But the Discipliner slithered through the crack and slammed the door in her face.

She pounded on the weathered wood as the monitors came to life. “Please, I’ll say anything you want! I’ll—” The familiar screech drowned out her plea and sent her in retreat to the corner of the room, hands pressed tightly to her ears. Despite her attempts to shut it out, the screech brought her eardrums near the point of bursting, emptying her mind of all thought except the pain. It was her worst nightmare: an enemy she could not fight and could not flee.

Then, as suddenly as it began, the screech transformed into a deep, soothing voice, “Soldiers are the rulers of society. They are the guardians of order, the light of justice. Everyone wants to be a soldier. But only a few are strong enough...brave enough...obedient enough.”

“No! Stop it!” Liz rose to her feet and stared at the screens, bombarded with images that flashed so fast she could barely tell what they were. Still, she was aware of them, somehow—as though she could *feel* what they represented and the message they were designed to teach her. It made her brain feel fuzzy, and she hated it. The first two times the Discipliner had subjected her to this, she had believed herself helpless. But now she embraced her anger and let it deepen, nurturing it into a relentless fire that could consume every doubt and fear in its path.

I don't have to listen to this anymore, she thought. I don't! She picked up the small chair and flung it against one of the walls, destroying several of the monitors in a shower of sparks. The voice droned on overhead, “...soldiers are powerful...they are resourceful...”

Resourceful, she repeated in her head, surprised she understood. *That means I can do anything I want, if I can just figure out how. And what I want is to get out of this room.*

She caught sight of a large shard of glass on the floor in front of the shattered monitors, and bent down to pick it up. The sharp edge nicked her, but she did not let go.

Soldiers are strong, the words echoed in her mind. *Soldiers do not fear pain.*

Liz turned to the door with the piece of glass and smiled. Once a boy had locked himself in a room on the first floor. Rather than wait for the matron and a key, the Discipliner had taken a thin plastic object and inserted it between the door and the frame, forcing it open. The same concept should work for her as well.

The glass cut into her hand a little more as she shoved it into the crack. She twisted it a couple of times, ignoring both the pain and the blood that covered her hands, until the lock finally released. She was free. Liz dropped the glass and wiped her slick hands on her jeans, then ventured into the dark hallway where—luckily—there was no one to be found.

As she crept farther down the hall, thunder roared outside, along with another sound she did not recognize: intermittent bursts of a strange popping noise.

She made it to the elevator and then back down to the first floor without seeing anyone, but once there she saw the matron and the Discipliner standing by the entrance, arguing. She balanced her desire to escape against her curiosity. *Knowledge is power*, her mind intoned. *A soldier gains knowledge whenever he can, however he can.*

Careful not to be seen, Liz crept closer to hear what the two adults were saying.

“...can’t just throw him back out into the streets, he’ll freeze to death!”

“He’s a stray, Karla. We have to go through normal protocols. Until then we’re not allowed to shelter him. You know the rules. Older than two, no Systemic designation, it’s to the slavers or the Great Army’s pyre.”

“I’m not sending him back out into the freezing rain,” the matron said. “They may call me heartless, but even I am not that far gone. I know you have skills for occasions such as these. You employed them once before. Now I need you to do it again.”

“That was a special case,” the Discipliner growled. “Sanctioned by a member of the hierarchy, and done the moment she was born. This boy is already six years old...what you ask is impossible.”

“I don’t want your excuses. Just get it done.”

Liz prepared to hide in case the Discipliner came her way, but her heart leaped out of her chest as a hand clamped over her mouth and its owner dragged her into the closest vacant room. They needn’t have bothered, for her first inclination wasn’t to scream but to despair. She was discovered and now would be punished for sure. Her captor spun her around slowly, and Liz’s mouth fell open. She had grown up around the five caretakers of the Capital Orphanage her entire life, and the woman standing before her looked nothing like those adults. Long golden curls fell down past her shoulders, shining in the

low light as if they had a glow of their own. Liz had limited contact with the outside world, but knew immediately this was probably the most beautiful woman she had ever seen.

The woman made a graceful motion for quiet as she silently shut the door. Liz's instincts placed her on the defensive, but she knew that if it was a choice between being caught by the Discipliner or by this radiant stranger, she would choose the latter.

The woman knelt before her and lit a candle, bathing both of them in warm light. As she looked upon the woman's face more closely, Liz couldn't help but blurt out, "You're beautiful."

She grinned at the comment but did not seem surprised. She wore her beauty like a garment and displayed it proudly. *Like a soldier wears a weapon*, Liz thought.

"Thank you," she reached forward and pushed a frayed blonde curl back behind Liz's ear. "You're very beautiful, too."

Liz's eyes widened. No one had ever told her that before.

"But look what they've done to you," the woman went on, tracing the tender spots of Liz's face. She reached for her bloody hands, lacerated by glass, and stared at them in horror. Tears misted her eyes, and Liz shook her head in disgust. *Tears are for the weak. A soldier does not know sorrow. A soldier does not cry.* Still, she couldn't help but wonder who this woman was to care for her so. Or maybe she was just upset that she had gotten blood all over her beautiful hands. Liz hoped she had hands like that someday.

"What's your name?" Liz asked.

The woman pursed her lips in brief hesitation before answering, "My name is Aurora."

“Aurora?” Liz repeated, dumbfounded. “But that’s *my* name. Or at least, my last name.”

“Yes, I know,” Aurora said. “That’s the reason I’m here.”

“Don’t you want to know my *first* name?”

“I already know it, Elizabeth.”

Liz winced, “I don’t like to be called Elizabeth. That’s what the boys call me when they tease me. My friends call me Lizzie.”

“That’s a shame,” Aurora frowned. “Elizabeth is such a good name. A strong name, one that you might want to use again one day.”

Liz doubted that would ever happen, but she didn’t want to be rude. “How did you know my name? Do you know me?”

“I know your name because I gave it to you. I’m your mother, Elizabeth.”

Liz paled, the breath stolen from her lungs. Her mother? But that couldn’t be true. She was an orphan, and orphans had no parents—at least, that’s what the matron and the Discipliner had told her. But when she looked in Aurora’s eyes, she saw the same brilliant blue that shone back at her from a mirror. The golden curls of hair were prettier—cleaner—than her own, but with a good wash hers might have that same glow. Even Aurora’s full lips and high cheekbones were familiar.

Her doubt became wonder, and then almost as quickly, despair. “But then...why would you leave me here? I don’t belong if I’m not an orphan. Have you come to take me away?” Her eyes alighted at the notion, and she even acknowledged a willingness to forgive her mother of the past if she would

save her now. But the answer just drove the blade of sorrow even deeper.

“No, Elizabeth. I’m sorry, but I can’t take you with me. I have to flee the city, and to succeed I must be a ghost. I won’t make it if you’re with me.”

“You’re leaving me to save yourself?”

Aurora recoiled as though Liz had slapped her, “It is not that simple. The road I must take is a dangerous one, and if we are found together your father will find you. And that...that must never happen, Elizabeth. You will be safe here.”

“Safe?” Liz felt a lump rise in her throat. *I won’t cry*, she assured herself. *Soldiers do not cry*. But there was at least one hope, “My father is alive?”

“For now,” Aurora replied, voice dripping with venom. “But put away any thoughts of seeking him out. He knows nothing of you, Elizabeth. He thinks you died when you were born. You could walk up to him on the street and to him you would just be another filthy gutter rat. Pray, for your own sake, that it stays that way.”

Liz gazed upon her mother and realized that the word beautiful could no longer describe her. There was no light in her eyes, no compassion on her face. She was wretched, cruel, and dark. “I wish I really was an orphan,” she said, staring straight into the icy depths of Aurora’s eyes. “I wish I had no mother.”

“I suppose I shouldn’t feel guilty, then, that I spent the past six years wishing you had not been born. You were the reason I was cast out of favor. Consider us even.” The lines

of her face turned harsh, consuming what remained of her beauty. “It was a mistake to come here. I thought I might see something of myself in you, something that would make all I have gone through worth it, but all I see is...*him*. I must go. Do not follow me.”

As her mother turned to leave, Liz could hold back no longer, “Did you ever love me?”

Aurora paused with her hand on the doorknob, and sighed, “When they placed you in my arms there was nothing in the world I loved more. But then they tore you away, and with it... my soul. Since then I have known only survival. If there is one piece of wisdom with which I would leave you, it is this: do not love; do not *desire* love. Love is a tempting weakness, and it will surely destroy you. Goodbye, Elizabeth.”

“Wait!” Liz pleaded, suddenly remembering what she had done upstairs and how much trouble she would be in. “Please, take me with you. I don’t care if you love me. I don’t care if you’re a bad person. I just want to run away.”

Her mother paused for one moment more, and then slipped through the door without another word. Liz rushed out behind her into the dark hallway, but her mother had already vanished. To succeed, her mother had said, she had to be a ghost. *That’s all you’ve ever been to me*, Liz thought. *It’s all you ever will be.*

But she didn’t need her mother or anyone else to escape. She could do that on her own. The matron and the Discipliner were probably still at the entrance. If she could make it to the back door, then she might have a shot. She turned and plowed right into a wall.

Liz grunted, barely registering at first that it was not an actual wall, but the body of a man. A strong hand reached down and took hold of her hair, forcing her to look up into his face as he sneered, “What are you doing down here, Dear Elizabeth? And how did you get out of that room?”

“I broke out!” she declared. “I destroyed your program and used the glass to open the door. I’m *resourceful*.”

“Indeed you are,” the Discipliner said, flashing a grin that betrayed his pride. “No child has ever broken out of that room. I suppose there is a first time for everything.” His hand tightened in her hair, and she felt a few strands pull free from her scalp. “But you’re a bit too resourceful for your own good, and obstinate. We’ll have to break you of that.”

He dragged her down the hallway by her hair, her eyes watering from the pain. She hated that he managed to draw tears from her—and hated even more that she could not control them—but she would not show fear. She knew the room where he was taking her. The other children lived in terror of it, but she would take it over the room with the monitors any day.

He opened the door and shoved her inside, “24 hours in darkness should do you good. We’ll talk when you’ve had time to think about what you’ve done.” He slammed the door, stealing away all light so she couldn’t even see her hand in front of her face.

Liz balled that hand into a fist and immediately regretted it, as the scabs trying to form on her sliced palms tore open once again. She felt fresh blood trickle down her wrist, and sighed angrily. So much effort, all for nothing.

A whimper sounded from somewhere in the room and her back went rigid: she was not alone. At first she didn't know what to think. The Discipliner had never put her in the room with another person before. Was this some kind of special punishment? Would she have to fight in the dark?

"Who's there?" she demanded. "I'm not afraid of you!"

The whimper came again, and she caught a distinct smell in the room, musty and dull like the ground after a hard rain. She knew there was a storm outside, and deduced logically that this person had to have just come in from it. Her unknown companion moved, and she heard the squish of drenched clothing. His breath was staccato, almost as though his teeth were chattering.

"Who are you?" she asked. "Are you an orphan?"

At that the whimper broke down into a choked sob, and she knew she shared the room with a child around her own age—a boy, she guessed, whose shivering sobs grated against her nerves.

Is this my punishment? To be in the same room with someone while they freeze to death?

"Stop crying," she ordered. "Crying is a sign of weakness. Soldiers don't cry."

"I...I'm not—I'm not a soldier," the child stammered. "A-and I'm n-not weak."

"Then grow up. Quit acting like a child."

"But I am. I'm just six years old."

"I'm six, too, dummy. That doesn't mean anything. There are no children behind these walls, the Discipliner says so."

"The...who?"

“The Discipliner,” Liz repeated. “He trains us to be soldiers. If we pass our OPE we get to stay at the orphanage. If we fail the matron sells us into slavery. Anyway, he was probably the one who put you in here.”

“Him? He was scary.”

“To you, maybe,” Liz snorted. “But I’m not afraid of anything.”

“Are you an orphan?”

I used to be. Liz’s thoughts returned to her mother, hardly able to believe she had been in her presence just moments before. If there was one way she was exactly like the other children, it was that she wondered what having a family would be like. She daydreamed about feeling safe in the arms of a father, or comforted by the words of a mother. But no longer. If parents were all like that woman she had just seen, she wanted no part of them.

“I asked you first,” she said.

“My dad died today,” the child said sadly. “And I think maybe...maybe my mom, too.”

Liz was glad the darkness hid her shock. She didn’t want this boy to know too much about her. But to have *both* parents die in *one day*? It seemed strange. “Where did you come from?”

“I don’t know. Out there, in the city.”

“I figured that one out already,” she snapped. “But where do you live? Where is your house?” If there had been a battle somewhere in the city then she wanted to know about it. Maybe, if she was lucky, this kid could help her slip away and show her where it was.

“Not a house,” came the reply. “A secret place.”

“Like a base?” she asked, her blood pumping. Some of the older kids talked about one hidden somewhere in the

northeastern ruins that the Great Army could never find. “A rebel base? Are *you* a rebel?” Liz had never felt more excited to meet someone in her entire life. It almost drove thoughts of her mother completely from her mind.

“We’re not rebels,” the boy said. “We’re the good guys!”

“Everyone thinks that, stupid, no matter what side they’re on,” Liz shook her head. “The Discipliner is going to give you a harder time than me, I think.”

“What do you mean?”

“Like I said, he trains us to be soldiers. And if you’re here, that means you’re going to be one, too...for the Great Army.”

The boy gasped, “Never. I’ll never fight for them. I’d rather...I’d rather be dead!”

Liz grinned. Maybe she liked this kid after all. “If you’re going to fight against them, you’ll need a friend to help you.”

“None of my friends are here.”

“We can be friends. I can be your friend.”

“But I...I don’t even know your name.”

“Lizzie. That’s what my friends call me. Or at least they would,” she admitted. “If I had any.”

“I’ll call you Lizzie, then.”

A moment of awkward silence passed. “Well? Are you going to tell me yours?”

“Okay,” the boy said. “As long as we’re friends.”

“We are.”

“I’m Elijah...Elijah Charity.”

2

Elizabeth Aurora sat up on the luxurious bed and stretched, welcoming the cold air as it kissed her bare skin. Not many soldiers were housed in such comfort, but being Chief of Command to the Imperial Conglomerate of Cities was not without its advantages. Still, she believed she would have slept soundly on a concrete floor so long as it was within the borders of a city.

A life spent within the world's urban domains could not have prepared her for the past year of roaming in the Wilderness, where the untamed wildlife of earth had retaken lands fled by humans while in the throes of war and starvation. Cities almost always maintained a subtle buzz of activity, even past curfew. Not so in the Wilderness. Outside the cities there was only silence, pierced occasionally by the sounds of the wild—predators who roared in victory while prey called out in despair.

That sound still haunted her dreams.

She dressed quickly, keenly aware of the approaching dawn, and thought hard upon the dream from which she had

just woken. There was no doubt it was a memory, though it was the first time she had ever seen it so vividly. Perhaps she had repressed it, desiring to forget the terrible meeting with the woman who called herself Liz's mother.

But then she remembered Sullivan's words a year before concerning Elijah Charity. *His memories were modified—and perhaps yours as well to better keep the secret—but I have reason to believe they will return.* Would the Discipliner have gone that far? Would he have erased her memory of the night 301 came into her life? *Yes*, she decided. *There's nothing that man would not do if it suited his interests.*

The recovery of the memory presented an interesting problem, however. Sullivan claimed her family was on Domination Crisis Eleven. But if her mother had come to her when she was six years old—well after the construction of the barrier that sealed the islands away from the rest of the world—then there was no way she could be there.

Liz walked to the table in the outer chamber of her quarters and unrolled the new world map. Half a century before there had been hundreds of thousands—millions—of cities spread out haphazardly across the globe, planted wherever a new growth of humanity demanded it. But the Persian Resurgence and the World System's subsequent rise had brought that to a swift and tragic end.

Of those many millions, only a fraction remained. And of the 21 cities that had once formed the World System, just 13 remained under their control. Those were marked in blue and limited to the continents of North and South America. The 8

Imperial divisions—5 in Europe, 3 in Australia—were marked in red. At first glance the odds seemed to heavily favor the World System, but there was also the continent of Africa to consider, colored in three shades of pink.

The Tripartite, formerly a territory subservient to the World System, had thrown in its lot with the Imperial Conglomerate of Cities. The Imperial Citadel had agreed to grant them autonomy on condition of victory, though Liz doubted Sullivan or his High Council would ever give up the resource-rich landmass. He might bring them and their meager towns into the Conglomerate, which was more than they would get from Napoleon Alexander, but they would never gain their freedom so long as the High Council ruled.

Darker shades on the map indicated the populated areas of each division, vast urban domains that were large enough to be nations in their own right. Examining the strategic placement of these super-cities, she couldn't help but acknowledge Napoleon Alexander's genius. The Persians had destroyed the world's infrastructures, and so when Alexander began his Tour of Rebirth the survivors gathered in those places where he offered them the comforts they once knew. But Alexander only rebuilt those cities that would be of strategic use to him once the time for his betrayal was at hand.

He had chosen well. The 21 civilized cities stood in prime locations for control of their continents, and though there were vast stretches of uninhabited Wilderness between them, Alexander had designed each as an entirely self-sustaining entity. Sieges had therefore proven useless, as the Conglomerate's

countless forays into the Wilderness proved. Each city maintained jurisdiction over the Wilderness areas of its division, monitoring Undocumented activity and reacting accordingly to wipe them out. But when the Imperial Guard landed, the Great Army remained behind the defenses of their cities, inviting the invaders to break themselves upon the walls.

Those Imperial generals who had tried did not return.

The civil war, to put it mildly, was at a standstill. No territory had been won or lost by either side in the year since the separation, and the World System had not taken a single offensive action. It was not hard for Liz to figure out why. Both Napoleon Alexander and his new second, Grand Admiral Derek Blaine, were brilliant tacticians. All they had to do was bide their time, counter the Conglomerate when necessary, and wait.

They may not have to wait much longer. One thing the cities were not built for—and that the High Council had not foreseen—was separation from the System's central computer. For two decades the economies of every city had been meticulously managed by data patterns and Systemics formulas, rationing where there was shortage and distributing where there was plenty. As a machine it managed with impunity, immune to accusations of favoritism or corruption. Without the central computer, the economic stability in each of the Imperial cities had immediately begun to deteriorate. Sullivan had his best minds working on a replication of the Systemics equations, but rumor had it that the task would take years. The Conglomerate would either consume itself or beg

to be restored to the World System before then. That was, no doubt, Alexander's master plan.

Liz did not care to be there when that plan came to fruition.

Her eyes traveled to the part of the map that most concerned her: two islands colored in black, as though any who traveled there might fall through a void into the center of the earth. The way her superiors in the World System had spoken of the place, they might actually believe it. The islands, now known as Domination Crisis Eleven, had been sealed away from the world after the System's expedition of conquest met with mysterious disaster and ended up at the bottom of the sea. Since then no one had seen or heard from the inhabitants. Most presumed them dead, starved out by loss of contact with civilization.

But that was where her family was reported to have been last, so regardless of the risk that was where she now must go. Her year of service to Sullivan's empire was up, and the agreement met. She had seen enough of blood and death.

A knock sounded on her door, and she looked up expectantly, "Come in."

"Chief of Command," one of her subordinates—loyal, the rarest kind—entered the office with a reverent bow. "There has been a summons from the emperor. He wishes to see you at once."

To wish me a happy anniversary, no doubt, Liz thought. And to find some way to retain my services for another year. She could not abide that, no matter what threats he leveled against her.

"Have you done what I asked, Major?"

“Yes, Chief. A vessel, the *Golden Queen*, awaits you across the Wasteland in the Arabian Sea.”

“My Halo?”

“Ready.”

“Thank you, Major,” Liz sighed. “Where am I to meet the emperor?”

The major’s eyes narrowed, “I’m confused, Chief. Everything is prepared. You need not bother with the meeting.”

But she did, she knew. There was still a chance—however slight—that Sullivan meant to keep his word. And if she had learned anything about the man, it was that he made a very powerful friend. If she could go without making an enemy of him, she would.

“I need to hear it straight from his mouth,” she said. “Where, Major?”

“The Chamber of the Citadel,” the major replied. “You are to appear before the full session.”

Liz didn’t know whether to feel alarmed or relieved. A public forum made it less likely for Sullivan to go back on his word, but an appearance before the full session of the government made her uneasy. It had all the marks of being summoned to trial. Perhaps she should flee after all. *No*, she decided, placing a hand on her Gladius, *I won’t be cowed by a few old politicians.*

It wouldn’t have mattered, anyway. She left her office just in time to see a squad of Imperial Guardsmen emerge from a door at the other end of the hall. None were on her personal staff. The major’s body went rigid as he came up beside her, and she gave

him a look of warning. While she appreciated his loyalty, the last thing she needed was for him to do something stupid.

“Chief Aurora,” the leader of the guardsmen said. “We’re here to escort you to the Chamber of the Citadel.”

“I gathered that,” Liz said dryly. “And while I appreciate the emperor providing my escort, I assure you that *Ignis* is the only protection I need.”

The guardsman’s gaze shifted to the ruby-cased Gladius on her hip, and he licked his lips nervously, “All the same, Chief, we have our orders.”

Liz smiled, “Then escort away.”

The Chamber of the Citadel was within walking distance of Saint Peter’s Basilica, and stood in the place that had once housed the Vatican’s audience hall. Liz’s dealings with the elected body of the Conglomerate had thus far been limited, but while she had been off in the West fighting the war, Sullivan had found himself in a different kind of battle. The Citadel had attempted to wrest control of the Imperial Conglomerate away from the High Council at least twice in the past year, and there were many who believed a third time would prove successful. Sullivan’s democratic farce was becoming a democracy in truth, and the old tyrants seemed powerless to stop it.

In the foyer just outside the main chamber, yet another squad stood guard, and the eyes of every man followed her. She was used to stares of lust and interest, but these were looks of trepidation—as if they expected her to draw her weapon and kill them all at any moment.

A man in a freshly pressed suit stepped out from behind the squad, out of place among the white-clad soldiers. He flashed a bright but condescending smile, “Good of you to come, Chief Aurora.”

“Magistrate,” Liz inclined her head and tried to keep her disdain in check. If there was one man in Rome she despised more than the emperor, it was Cirillo Costa, Magistrate of Rome. Of the ruling class, Costa had been magistrate since the death of his predecessor in Justus’s rebellion. After his selection Costa assisted in Grand Admiral Donalson’s purge, in which over half the city’s population had been exterminated. Many Citadel members and citizens still called daily for his death, but his loyalty to the High Council had protected him thus far.

“I’m afraid I am going to have to ask you to surrender your weapons,” Costa said. “They are not allowed in the Chamber during full session, I’m sure you understand.”

Liz crossed her arms, “I am Chief of Command over the Imperial Guard, Magistrate, and I have been armed during the full session before.”

“Rules change.”

“You are not a member of the High Council, Costa,” she challenged. “You are not even a representative of the Citadel. What you are is a dog, scrambling after scraps from the table of your masters. Don’t stand there and presume to place yourself over *me*. You oversee the civilian operations of one city. I oversee the military might of the entire Imperial Guard. Step aside and stop wasting my time.”

Costa's smile turned sour, "You are as obstinate as you are useless. Remove your weapons, or they will be removed for you."

Liz took one look at the guardsmen that surrounded her, and saw in their eyes that they were afraid of being forced to do just that. Her heart sank. Costa did not have the power to command the military, which meant these orders must have come from the emperor. With a sigh, she relinquished her sidearm and her knives.

"Your Gladius, Chief Aurora," Costa sneered. "I may be a dog, but I am not a fool."

She unclipped *Ignis* and slammed it down next to her other weapons, "Touch it, Costa, and I will have your hand."

The Magistrate moved aside and allowed her to pass as the guardsmen pushed open the doors. A great cacophony of noise washed over her, the rabble of hundreds of politicians from the Imperial Cities, all faceless to her. The only ones that really mattered were on the raised platform on the opposite side.

A hush fell over the Chamber by the time she reached the center of the floor, and the click of her boots on the marble floor echoed ominously from the walls. Sullivan sat higher than his peers, who were arrayed symmetrically to his right and left in two groups of four. Holt was there, his expression grim and filled with frustration. Orion, who had taken the seat of Gordon Drake after his assassination, seemed particularly pleased. She acknowledged them both, one a friend...the other an enemy.

Liz turned her attention to Emperor Sullivan, whose stark eyes bored into her with dull resignation. Whatever was about to

take place in the Chamber, he did not like it...but he accepted it all the same. Sullivan stood and his voice cut through the silence, "Chief of Command Aurora, that is quite far enough."

She stopped walking about halfway between the floor's center and the High Council's platform, and stood at attention with a calm dignity.

"You have been summoned here to answer for a grave matter," Sullivan went on. "It has been reported to this body that your leadership this past year has been erratic and irresponsible. Withdrawing troops when your generals press for aggression, lifting sieges as soon as our lines break...even going against the advice of the Citadel in the war's prosecution. The original plan called for a strike against the Chilean-Argentine Alliance, from there to strike against the South American capital at Rio."

"That plan was drawn up by politicians, Emperor, not soldiers."

"It had the approval of three-quarters of the generals!" A voice shouted out behind her. The rabble roared their anger, and Sullivan's face turned red with a rage of his own. No one would dare have spoken out of turn in a court held by Napoleon Alexander.

"The generals were all part of the World System's machine, so it is no wonder," she said as they quieted down. "The most valuable skill a Great Army general knows is how to say 'Yes, sir.' Well I am no general. I was an intelligence officer before I became a Specter, and I promise you that to take the southern tip of that continent will be the end of us. Their population is not concentrated, and they have been arrayed on the defensive

for the better part of twenty years. We would win, but it would cost more than I am willing to pay—not to mention raising up a second enemy to harass us from the rear. One enemy is enough, gentlemen, and better the enemy we know.”

“But after you scrapped that plan you also refused the second,” Sullivan went on. “General Gavin believes that a Solithium Concussion Missile could break apart Rio’s defenses and allow us to storm the city.”

“It would also kill a hundred thousand civilians,” she retorted. “Some victories are not worth the collateral damage necessary to achieve them. If it is blood you want, let it stain your own hands.”

Sullivan sneered, “There is also the matter of Charles Justus, who you released from confinement to create havoc in Division One. The mission to cover his insertion cost us three ships and damaged ten more. Yet we have heard nothing from him for a year.”

Liz grimaced. That much, at least, she could not explain. Justus had not made contact, and there had not been so much as a whisper of him anywhere in the World System. After months of waiting, she had no choice but to assume him dead. And with Silent Thunder dispersed in the Wilderness, his mission was near useless anyway.

“These instances have given rise to beliefs that you no longer defend the interests of the Imperial Conglomerate of Cities,” Sullivan went on. “Some have suggested that you might work for some rebel group, recruited, perhaps, during your time in the Triad. Still others say you are a World System

spy.” The emperor leaned forward. “But I say you have served only yourself, biding your time until I release you from service. Incompetence, perhaps, but not treason. That is why I offer you the chance to redeem yourself, with one additional year of command.”

She opened her mouth to object, but Sullivan cut across her, “You will implement Gavin’s plan to take Rio. You will occupy Division Seventeen, and then employ this same tactic on all of the remaining System cities that will not yield. You will also train Imperial Specters in accordance with our original agreement, to combat the rise of Alexander’s Spectral Army.”

Liz shook her head in frustration. She had not yet faced the Spectral Army, but some of her generals had. Two of her former comrades had survived 301-14-A’s defection in the Central Square a year ago, the two she cared for the least: Blaine, and his Specter General Tony Marcus. Together they had rebuilt Specter to a force nearly a thousand strong, in addition to raising up a smaller band of elite warriors that made up Blaine’s special rebel-hunting corp.: the Spectorium. Sullivan had called them Alexander’s army, but in truth they were Derek Blaine’s, and they had never lost a battle. It was said they knew no fear.

“Thank you, Emperor,” she said. “But I am afraid I must decline.”

Shocked whispers rose up around the chamber, and Sullivan’s voice lowered into a tone of challenge, “You understand, then, that I will have no choice but to confine you here until such a time as your loyalty can be proved.”

“But you’re right, Emperor,” she said. “I *am* in this for myself. You should know that from our original deal. Shall I enumerate the details of that arrangement to the Citadel?”

Sullivan’s mouth snapped shut and his face paled. She had him. For the past year he had kept a tight lid on the fact that Elijah Charity had nearly been chosen Chief of Command instead of her. No one knew the reason for Specter Captain 301-14-A’s betrayal in the Central Square, though his story was quickly becoming legend. She could only imagine the explosion if his true identity ever became known. On that point, at least, Sullivan and Napoleon Alexander seemed to agree.

Caught in his own web of deceit, Sullivan beckoned her, “Approach, Chief.”

She closed the remainder of the distance, and Sullivan came down on level with the other members of the High Council. Even so, he had to lean down to whisper, “What do you want?”

“Give me a ship, and let me go.”

Sullivan paused as though to think it over, but she could see in his eyes that he had no intention of releasing her.

“Was any of it true?” she asked. “What you said of my family.”

The emperor nodded, “Every word.”

“You once told me that the Capital Orphanage’s Discipliner might have modified my memory to conceal 301’s true identity. You were right. He erased my memory of 301’s arrival. But now I remember, and something else happened that night. My mother came to see me.”

Sullivan’s eyes went wide, “Your mother?”

“Dressed in the garb of a palace aide, fleeing to the Wilderness and leaving me behind. I can only assume, then, that you knew of her, and—given the fact that Domination Crisis Eleven was already sealed away at the time—that you lied.”

“I did not lie to you, Elizabeth. You had family on Domination Crisis Eleven when it was sealed away. But your mother was not one of them. I know how that night ended for her.”

“Did she make it?”

“No,” Sullivan said. “She was caught before even leaving the city and executed as a traitor.”

Liz couldn’t help but feel a stab of sorrow. Despite how horrible the woman had been to her, she only had one mother. It made her want to reach the others as soon as possible, lest she lose her chance with them as well.

“Please,” she looked Sullivan in the eye and—just for a moment—let her heart show, “Just let me go.”

He shook his head, “I can’t. You have the right of it. The generals are fools. I need you here. The Conglomerate needs you. What will it take? Name your price, and it is yours.”

I have named my price, she thought bitterly, and you have denied me twice over. She could not allow him to string her along for even another day, let alone a year. “You have nothing more I want, Emperor. We’re finished here.”

Liz turned from the platform and strode back the way she had come, but paused when Sullivan’s cry echoed throughout the chamber, “The Chief of Command has left me no choice

but to see her brought to trial on the charge of treason. Guardsmen, take her into custody and confine her in the catacomb cells.”

Over my dead body. Liz took off toward the exit as guardsmen emerged from the shadows, and a surge of noise from the alarmed Citadel drowned out Sullivan’s shouts. Four soldiers intercepted her at the door, their shoulders relaxed and their faces calm. She was easy prey in their eyes, unarmed and ensnared by their trap. *They have forgotten who I am, but after today they will remember forever.*

She rushed them and launched an uppercut on the largest man’s chin, simultaneously raising a knee to his groin. He blocked the fist but not the knee, and went down like a brick. Before he even crumpled she chopped the man next to him square in the throat, and he fell to the floor choking for breath.

The remaining two moved to grab her, and she saw twenty more—perhaps forty, she couldn’t be sure—approaching from behind. She wouldn’t have time to deal with the other two before the full force reached her, and then she really would be helpless.

Ignis, she thought, I need to get to Ignis.

She slid lithely through the narrow aisle made by the fallen guardsmen, evading the grips of her remaining foes long enough to squeeze through the door and shut it back behind her. Strangely enough, there was a lock on the outside, which she slid in place just as the guardsmen began pounding. She breathed a sigh of relief. Whatever the reason for the lock, it had saved her.

She turned, and her breath caught in her throat. An arc of assault rifles stared her down, leaving her no choice but to raise her hands in surrender. She had completely forgotten about the squad already in the antechamber.

Magistrate Costa's cackle sounded out from behind the guardsmen, and then the man himself emerged from the arc. She felt a stab of fury as he held *Ignis* out tauntingly before her eyes, "Looking for this?"

"I warned you what would happen if you touched that, Costa."

"You're not exactly in a position to make threats, Aurora." He made a show of studying the ruby hilt. "I think I'll add this trophy to my collection. And who knows? Perhaps the emperor will allow me to collect you as well."

Beauty is a weapon, more powerful than any sword, the matron's voice seemed to whisper in her ear. *Enslave a man through his eyes, and the rest of him is yours for the taking.*

"You'll never have me, Costa," she challenged. "The thought makes me sick."

Costa stepped forward, grinning from ear to ear, "Do you really think you can deny me? The Magistrate of Rome?"

"The *dog* of Rome," she mocked. "Apparently you can't get it through your head."

He stepped forward again and ran his eyes over her lustfully. *One more, just one step closer...*

But Costa never got to take that step, for at that moment the entire left wall exploded. Stone and ash and men went flying across the antechamber, and the shockwave threw her

sideways. *Keep your balance*, her training warned. *A fallen soldier is a dead soldier*. She managed it barely, though the men around her were not so lucky.

A Halo-4 swooped in through the hole and the door opened to reveal her loyal major, “Come on, Chief! There’s not much time!”

The guardsmen were beginning to recover from the blast all the more quickly now that they realized its cause, but she had one more item of business to attend to. Costa lay on the floor in front of her, just out of reach of the ruby cylinder. She bent to pick it up, and when the cool red stone touched her skin she felt a wave of fire spread straight through her...the fire of power; of strength; of invincibility. *Ignis*, Gladius of Fire. She couldn’t have chosen a better name.

Liz made to leave, but something grabbed at her. Instinctively, she swung *Ignis* around and brought the blade to life just in time to slice straight through Magistrate Costa’s wrist. He fell back from her, screaming out in pain and holding his stump. “I *did* warn you, you know.”

The guardsmen shrunk from the sight of the Spectral Gladius as she bounded past them and jumped into the Halo. Through Costa’s pained screams she heard him cry out, “Stop them you cowards! Shoot that thing down!”

Liz barely made it to her seat before the Halo blasted out of the antechamber and ascended rapidly into the sky. Breathless, she turned to the major, “Thank you. And you were right...I should never have gone in there. I just didn’t think...”

“That the emperor would go that far?” the major asked.

“No,” she shook her head. “I thought he would be different than Napoleon Alexander. But I was wrong. He put a lock on the door to the Chamber.”

The major’s eyes narrowed, “So?”

“He’s already thinking ahead,” she replied. “One day he is going to lock the Citadel in that room, and none of them will get out alive.”

“Perhaps all those who war against tyrants are doomed to become tyrants themselves.”

“Not me,” she said. “I am done with this war. How long until the *Golden Queen*?”

The major made to answer, but the pilot interrupted, “Chief! We have company!”

“Report.”

“Three Halos coming in fast on our six. They’ve launched missiles! Taking evasive maneuvers!”

“No!” Liz cried, taking a look at the targeting screen. “We’ve armed all our Halos with the new smart missiles. You’ll never shake them.”

“Then what can we do?”

“Take us into the atmosphere,” she ordered. “Maximum speed.”

“Chief,” the major said. “Those missiles will lose propulsion in space, but so will we. Not to mention decompression and—”

“We have no choice, Major. Let’s just hope this bird can outrun them.” She held on tight to the armrest as the Halo ascended rapidly, and wondered if it would all come down to this. All that she had sacrificed to find her family, and she

would die here before ever getting close. *Better than dying on Sullivan's leash.*

“It’s no use, Chief,” the pilot said. “We aren’t rising fast enough. Impact in five, four, three...”

Liz closed her eyes and braced for death.