

BOOK FOUR OF THE WAR GRYPHON SAGA

THE SHADOW'S GLARE

The background of the cover is a dramatic illustration. A large, dark griffin with a lion's body and an eagle's head is the central focus. A knight in full plate armor with a blue surcoat is riding on its back, holding a lance. To the left, a warrior in a horned helmet and fur-trimmed tunic holds a shield and a sword. To the right, a soldier in a blue tunic is seen from behind, holding a sword. The sky is a deep, swirling purple and magenta.

A NEW DARKNESS

RISES

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FLEMING

Robert H. Fleming

The Shadow's Glare

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War Gryphon World Map

For a detailed map of the War Gryphon world, from the Sprawling north to the Rantum Empire in the distant south, please visit

<https://roberthfleming.com/the-war-gryphon-saga-world/>

For more information about Robert and his books, visit roberthfleming.com

Book One

I won't admit my feelings to the other officers. We are all silent and stone-faced as ever before our men and General Curia. But I dwell on Cabiri. I can't forget the failings of the general's father.
We march at first light. This night is cold. I am afraid.

Memnas Chronicles, Prima Captain Dramus, Year of Infinity 105

Prologue

A rotten log collapsed under the Sila's boot and caused her to stumble. She caught herself on the side of a tree trunk etched with wet moss and regained her footing. Darkness had descended quickly after early evening. A flickering light marked a campfire through the trees.

The clearing opened and she found a single figure feeding twigs into a small flame in the center. Two boulders sat on either side of the fire as if the scene waited for only her to arrive.

She crept forward, silent and cautious. The man hunched over the flames, his back to her approach, unaware of her presence like all mortals. Something drew her closer and closer.

"You're welcome to join me," the figure said.

The Sila jumped back a step but regained herself quickly. She straightened and cleared her throat.

"Most people don't notice me." She glanced around the shadowy clearing.

The man turned, his face remaining in shadow, the fire as backlight. The Sila couldn't place the strange feeling of familiarity she had with him.

"You approached me. I've just been sitting here." He shifted and continued tending his fire. He then reached out a hand, palm up, to offer the rock on the opposite side as a seat. "Sit. I have tea."

The Sila walked in a wide arc around the fire. When he remained huddled and didn't morph into a demon or some such terror, she at last

stepped up to the rock and sat. Her body was tense and ready to flee at any moment.

This is very strange, she thought to herself.

The man didn't say anything more. The Sila took a moment to look around at what the fire illuminated. There were plants of various types planted in the loose ground and small pots strewn about haphazardly. There was no organization to the horticulture, but all the blooms were healthy and bright, thriving despite the cold season.

"Wildflowers," the man said. He looked up once more, but the firelight was too bright between them for the Sila to fully see his face. "I grow them when time and season allow. Most do all right if I can tend to them."

The Sila didn't see a cart or any carrying mechanism and she wondered if this was where the man lived full-time, hidden in the deep woods near Belgada's capital and away from civilization. He certainly seemed like a hermit.

The man reached over and plucked yellow petals off a nearby flower. He ground them between his thumb and forefinger while bringing out two mugs with his other hand. Distributing the petals between the mugs, he reached for a pot within the flames that the Sila hadn't noticed before. The fire leaped out of the way for his fingers. The Sila blinked, knowing it must've been a trick of the light on her eyes. She narrowed her gaze on the stranger and watched him closely.

"Tea?"

The Sila took the offered mug to be polite. She didn't need mortal sustenance or warm drink even on the coldest nights. Holding the cup between her hands, a sudden sensation spread up her fingers. She stared down at the dark liquid within.

The man smiled at her and held up his mug in a mock cheers motion. His bright teeth broke the shadows cast by his hood. He then put his tea down beside him without drinking.

“Sorry I don’t have any food to offer you,” the man said. “If you’d arrived earlier, you could’ve joined my dinner. I don’t see many visitors out here.”

“You’re Belgadan,” the Sila said, placing his noble accent all at once. “You shouldn’t be able to see me.”

She tasted a sip from her cup absentmindedly. The tea was bitter but then soothing and the same warmth that spread up her arms gripped her throat and stomach.

“The empire has no gods.” She shivered and took another sip.

The man tilted his head. His smile hadn’t changed. “Belgadans don’t need them; they worship themselves. They rely on their grit and focus and determination.”

“And their Infinities.” The Sila allowed the mocking bite behind her words to escape. She took a long gulp of her tea and nearly scorched her throat.

“That’s merely a marking of time.” The man waved away her statement with a hand above his head. “They control their own destiny, at least the nobles and the powerful.”

Silence settled between them. The Sila found her mind muddled and slow. She looked at the mug in her hand, frowning.

“They don’t need foreign gods meddling in their affairs.”

It took a moment for the man’s words to register, but then the Sila’s eyes snapped up. His cup sat untouched next to him. His smile gleamed sharp and dangerous.

“Did you know these are the flowers that grow over the dead emperors and heroes of Belgada’s past?” He reached out and caressed the petals from the same plant as before.

The Sila’s head spun and not because of her sudden realization and the confirmation of her mistakes. She should’ve been more cautious. A Belgadan couldn’t touch her. But this man...

He looked back to her and his smile was gone. His mouth was now a thin line and shrouded in shadow. The Sila’s cup tumbled from her hand. Her body crumbled soon after and the blackness of the night closed in completely before she struck the ground.

Chapter 1

Air screeched by Martius's ears as the beaches rolled below. Avorian held them at a steady high altitude, pressing west and south and following the coastline. They kept close to the sea, with both rider and gryphon keeping one eye on the desert expanse on their left.

That was their true direction. Soon, the legion would turn south to face the perils of the arid land.

After the disaster of Carnassus, the legion hadn't marched directly through the wastes of Gura as Martius had expected. Instead, they kept to the southern bank of the Tilian River and made for the coast before heading south. This was easier on the legion and kept Gaius's troops fresh and ready as the gryphons, demigryphs, and legionary outriders all scouted forward in search of their new enemy.

Avorian wiggled his torso and angled them inland. He banked off the path soon and kept clear of the hot air rising from the dunes. Below them, the beaches fell away and became rocky and broken. The mouth of another river appeared from the west.

The Gura broke into many pieces as it neared the sea. There were sandbars jutting from its murky waters and marshes stretching about to create a fertile delta breaking through the dry landscape. Just to the south stood the city of Lectra, a collection of shacks and stone buildings built low to the sand over ancient rubble. This was to be the legion's jumping-off point for the next campaign.

Avorian fell into a landing path without instruction from his rider. Martius kept his eyes on the horizon, where shadows gathered across the undulations of the desert and the river trickled in from the distance. The darkness seemed to grow and shift even though it was midday. He, Avorian, and their army marched into that dangerous blackness.

More rebels, this time from legions hardened in the continuous fighting of the southern lands, sought to take power across the empire. General Zagros wanted Talia's throne. Martius would fight them the same as he had the rebel Prince Mallus.

The beginning of this campaign felt somehow more hopeful than the last. It'd been a trial taking Arta, but now that task was complete and Bardylis was captured and Paulus was on the run in exile once more, Belgada seemed stable.

Princess Talia was safe. She headed north back to Belgada and would bury her father and be safe in the palace and attempt to rule. The Scipian Verstappas and her personal guard would protect her and the walls of the city and the palace would keep all enemies out. Martius could focus on his campaign against the princess's enemies.

Reaching to his side, Martius touched the outside of a satchel that hung from his shoulder. Inside was a letter recently arrived from Talia as well as a book the empress had sent him.

She'd sent a history record from the palace's own library. Upon receiving the book, the rider's spirit had instantly lifted tenfold. It was a firsthand account of General Metellus Curia's Memnas Campaign in the last war against Locria from two hundred years previous.

Talia understood him, and despite all her worries and the loss of her father and everything swirling around her throne, she'd thought enough of

him to send something he'd enjoy reading while on campaign. Martius's heart skipped every time he opened the book and he'd already read it through twice and was working on a third pass.

The rider glanced down over Avorian's right wing. The Gura sparkled below, delta falling away to the north and the full waterway forming as it stretched to Lectra. General Curia had crossed this waterway and pushed west not far from this very spot. The general burned his boats once his army was across to inspire his men and inform them of the importance of their fight. There would be no path home except with victory.

Inspiration, that was key. Martius and the Fifteenth needed to find a similar victory against a strong foe, just like the famous general's legions. They needed to win for Princess Talia.

Empress. Empress Talia.

Martius still thought of her as a princess. The title didn't fit, perhaps a portent for the empire as a whole. But Talia would manage. Martius was sure of it.

She'd grab the throne firmly and the citizens would love her.

The rider was also confident the Fifteenth would crush Zagros and Air Captain Goras and their corps of stolen gryphons. Avorian's body tilted as he twisted his head around to meet Martius's eye. The gryphon agreed. Avorian was confident and happy, even as his memories of their enemies stealing gryphons still smoldered. He was ready for the next fight.

The river continued its winding way into the desert. Gura would be a proper city, unlike Lectra. Those streets were filled with legend, ancient stories even older than Harpalus's Ephes.

Beyond the stone pyramids and glimmering streets of Gura, the desert would fall away and the land would drift westward and rise towards the

great Cyna Mountains, birthplace of empires. Harpalus rose to power below those peaks and found Belgadus up in the highlands. Other great generals had arisen across those hills and plains and mountaintops. Martius hoped to see that landscape once they were through with Zagros and his rebellious legion.

He wanted to see the entirety of the empire once it was at peace. The scar from the fighting at Polis. The ruin of Acab. South to Epirus and then west to Scipia. Glorious sights awaiting him. History and legend that he'd only read about were just within reach on his gryphon's wings.

Avorian banked and took them back toward Lectra. To the west, he could make out the coastline diving south and hooking to form the Esa Gulf. In much more recent history, the fleet of Locria had been smashed to bits and sunk there, paving the way for Belgada's victory and the destruction of the west's rival empire by Curia a few years later. As always, Martius felt the weight and glory of history wafting off the land. He needed to be careful and keep his feet planted in the present, at least when not lost in his Memnas Campaign book.

Avorian dumped the air from his wings and tilted his body upward, giving a few heavy flaps to slow his momentum. He then dropped into the stretch of the legion's camp designated for the air corps. His talons touched down softly, barely kicking up sand, and he trotted into the pen.

Martius swung down off the saddle and pulled out a handful of pecans from his pouch. The mount snapped at them eagerly.

They were running low on the favorite snack. But luckily, this region had other foods that Avorian enjoyed. Once the war mount finished with the treat, Martius stepped to a nearby feeding trough. Inside were oranges,

sliced into wedges with the skin still attached. He picked up a handful and tossed them at Avorian.

The gryphon snapped up each with his beak. He never missed, no matter how quickly Martius threw, devouring them skin and all.

Martius made to step away from the trough, but Avorian dropped his shoulders and spread his front legs out wide. With an open beak and bob of his head, he begged his rider to play.

“Always more with you,” Martius said with narrow eyes. But he turned and picked up more oranges anyway.

He threw two in quick succession without warning and Avorian caught them both. As the gryphon chewed, Martius stepped away but was struck by a flying object. Something slimy slid down his cheek. The skin of a devoured orange.

Avorian cawed and rocked his head before bounding out into the larger pen area. Martius wiped his cheek with the back of his forearm and clicked his tongue in his mouth. He had to fight to keep from smiling.

The great gryphon had been in a good mood while on this campaign. He'd been depressed at first when Talia and Axias had left the army. But he, like Martius, understood there was an important job to do. Another hard campaign wasn't without reward. Both rider and mounts believed they would see the empress soon in a time of peace.

Martius lunged after his war beast, planning to give chase and play along with Avorian's game. But the mount stiffened and darted back to his rider's side. Martius's hands went instinctively to the reins, ready to mount up, thinking there was danger close, Goras and Hoplas finally appearing in an attacking flight.

But what had startled Avorian was nothing more than his ego.

Three demigryphs galloped around the edge of the pen and into the legion's fortified camp. Avorian watched them through a slitted glare and made sure they were gone before releasing the tension in his legs and shoulders and stepping away from his rider.

Martius looked at the sky and let out a sigh before chuckling to himself. Avorian didn't notice his rider's mocking thoughts. He was too busy bounding away to resume his game.

The mount was happy with his belly full. Martius had been rationing pecans, as he hadn't been able to find a grove anywhere in this dust-filled land. But there were endless orange trees along the banks of the Gura. The short plants bore heavy fruits that were easy to pluck and full of juicy flesh that Avorian loved.

The gryphon had been part of Belgada's legions his entire life and had seen much of the world. From the memories the mount showed Martius, he seemed to have a favorite fruit in every region. Pecans would always be his main love—and he would never, ever forget the nuts—but his palate was more refined than Martius originally thought.

Leaving Avorian to finish eating and playing, Martius walked to the side wall of the makeshift stables and sat down against it. He pulled the Memnas book from his satchel and thumbed back to the place he'd left off the previous evening.

General Curia pushed his men aggressively against Locria's remaining forces. They would engage at the fateful site near the settlement of Memnas itself. The Belgadans would use a double-envelop attack and utterly destroy the Locrians, paying them back for decades of war and hardship and defeat on Belgadan soil.

It was glorious. The words were poetic and epic and the valor of the empire's soldiers shone, as if Martius were standing on a hill, witnessing the glowing battle itself. But soon the real world came back to the fore. Wings thrummed on approach to the camp, drawing Martius back to the present. He was at Lectra, not Memnas, and his legion marched against an enemy they couldn't find and barely understood.

A gryphon approached from the south and flew in fast. Martius stood and stored his book back in his bag. The blur of Ptolemas flew over the front of the camp and dropped into a landing. Clavius clung to his back.

Martius marched to meet his fellow rider as he dismounted and led his gryphon into the pen.

"Anything?" Martius asked.

Clavius shook his head. He pointed his mount toward the feeding troughs. Ptolemas was a much more mature eater than Avorian.

The two men stepped to the side of the pen and leaned on the fence, looking out into the camp. Martius had been afraid of Clavius's answer and now dwelt on the legion's position.

The army had made good time and held a strong position at the mouth of the waterway, controlling the gateway to the sea and the path out of the desert into Belgada's central provinces. But Zagros and his legions remained hidden. And they could be lurking anywhere.

This caused Gaius and the loyalist force to hesitate. They'd stopped at Lectra for ten days, when Martius had assumed they would power on to Gura. He waited and the air corps had flown in circles, scouting a barren landscape without anything to find.

"You said you'd been stationed in the Sarissa garrisons before?" Martius said after a few moments.

Clavius shook his head but then said, “Yes. I was young.”

“Zagros was the commander then?”

“Yes.”

Clavius was stiff against the fence. He and Martius had talked briefly of the newer rider’s past in the legions, but had never gone into the specifics. Martius wanted to press for more information.

“What kind of general was he?” Martius asked.

Clavius straightened and looked to check on Ptolemas at the troughs and then returned to resting on the fence.

“Strong,” he said eventually. “Disciplined. Smart. Determined. Just like Gaius.”

“Better than Gaius?” The question felt wrong to even speak aloud.

“No,” Clavius answered immediately. Definitively.

Martius let the answer hang there, hoping it would erase the memory of his question. He wanted the words to solidify against his doubts and worries and the waiting of the endless desert days.

“What could they be planning?” Martius said.

Clavius pushed off the fence. “I don’t know.” He moved to the gate and Martius followed. “There are others who’ve marched with him, or had a family member who did or something similar. Gaius has talked to all of them. No one can make a good guess.”

They walked along a side pathway around the gryphon rider quarters and then marched up the main thoroughfare that ran down the middle of all legionary encampments. Soldiers and engineers and horses and demigryphs moved everywhere.

“They must be farther west, waiting for us,” Clavius said as they passed the mess hall at the center of camp.

“Or south. They could still be in the highlands.” Martius glanced up the street to the front gates that blocked his view of the village beyond.

“Could be south,” Clavius agreed. “Or in any direction. Zagros liked to surprise the mountain tribes where he could.” He left his last words with a shrug.

Martius and Avorian had scouted in the legion’s rear. They’d flown east over the desert and then back to the coast. Not a single soul had been spotted below them. The great worry was that somehow the enemy had slipped past the loyalists and were already marching freely north. In truth, Martius thought the new rebels were waiting for Gaius to overextend, hiding within Gura or in the western hills.

Martius had wanted to fly forward and see Gura himself, but he’d held back on the urge. He was the commander of the Fifteenth’s air corps and needed to stay close to the main force. Avorian couldn’t be caught out away from the infantry if there was an ambush or some other emergency. He would be patient, and wait his turn to see the obelisks and stone statues and pyramids of the ancient civilization when the time came.

“Why do you think he’s rebelling?” Martius asked.

Clavius didn’t answer and silence stretched between them. There was only the soft pad of their boots on the sandy ground. Martius used the space to dwell on power, realizing all on his own that it was the only thing that would drive a man like Zagros.

“It’s all strange,” Clavius said at last. “I could almost say they’ve changed their minds.”

“They stole gryphons.”

Martius’s statement didn’t help clear up matters. It was merely fact. There were no answers.

Shadowy memories of flying over the keep of Carnassus, giving chase as Zagros and Goras stole the captured gryphons, flickered within Martius's mind once more. They were dark images and made his chest tighten and grow cold.

The face of Goras reared up the clearest of all, sneering with malice in his eyes. Martius wanted to fight this rebel in the sky. Avorian desired to lock claws with Hoplas. For revenge. For glory. To end all this fighting and gain peace.

The pair turned a corner and found Prima Captain Basilas with Sergeant Atras and some sappers working to place a support pole in the ground. Their project looked like the beginning of the porch for one of the headquarter buildings. The longer the legion stayed in place, the more permanent and expansive buildings became. Martius thought the effort rather pointless.

The prima captain dusted his hands off and turned to the two new arrivals when he spotted them.

"What news from the flights?"

"Nothing," Martius and Clavius said together. Clavius added a shake of his head.

Basilas didn't seem surprised.

Martius pointed at the pole that was just set on the ground. Atras and the sappers were already prepping another one adjacent to it. "Looks like we're staying a while longer?"

Basilas shook his head. "No," he said. "I've news on that front. Follow me."

Atras shot the prima captain a glare that asked *Why are we building this, then?* The expression spoke more effectively than if the sapper actually

spoke the words.

The prima captain marched up the street and Martius had to step lively to keep up with him. Basilas threw some words over his shoulder.

“Gaius has made a decision,” the first spear said. “We march south tomorrow. Get the gryphons ready. We finally make for Gura.”

Chapter 2

The legion's impatience built upon itself. Basilas tried not to dwell on either the fatigue or the boredom festering within the ranks of his legion. But the young Air Captain Martius represented all the issues plaguing this campaign in one person.

Restless. Tired. Drained of valor and the spaced filled with doubts.

The prima captain led Martius and Clavius through the camp towards the legion's commander and the meeting that would follow. He hoped Gaius's chosen orders would be the right path to eliminate the trapped feelings running throughout the army.

Basilas wasn't one to doubt Belgada's chances in a campaign. On the contrary, he was usually overconfident and had rushed into far too many battles that should've caused his death. But he'd always emerged, if not unscathed, then able to fight another day and with the empire strengthened behind him.

Even in civil war, Belgada found a way to make its own path.

But this new struggle was never-ending. Paulus was free again. Bardylis waited in prison in Belgada and the ranks of his rebel legionnaires were eliminated. And yet another head of the monster reared up still, like the hydra of ancient Ephes whose story had frightened Harpalus when the general was a boy.

All this worry was before Basilas's mind fell to the paralyzed nature of General Gaius, the prima captain's oldest friend and the leader of the

Fifteenth Legion and the Belgada loyalist cause.

The death of Titus was an understandable reason to unsettle the general. But Basilas had never seen Gaius indecisive and hesitant. Today, though, the general had finally made up his mind.

They stepped into a circle of logs and stumps around a fire adjacent the command post. Gaius was waiting for them.

“Welcome.” The general’s voice was plenty strong and confident. It felt good to Basilas’s ears to hear that voice come back after days of questioning and debate with their heads bowed together.

The prima captain nodded to the general and took his seat. Martius gave a stiff salute and Clavius did as well, with both air captains spreading to either side around the circle.

Captains Argos and Graccus were already present and the leaders of the remaining companies would arrive shortly. Argos sat with his helmet off and resting on one knee. A single lock of his hair drifted down over the top of one eye. Everyone waited patiently.

After the theft of the gryphons at Carnassus, the legion’s pride had been hurt. None of their air corps had been injured. But it was a matter of honor.

The legion needed to fight through its issues and men itself.

Basilas needed to think of a parable, perhaps the story of the Hydra or something close, to tell his friend. Beyond the normal duties of the prima captain, Basilas always felt he had the job of keeping Gaius stable and strong. The general rarely needed it, but the prima captain had to be ready when he did.

Basilas reached down and wrapped his hand around the hilt of Pothos at his waist. The sheath clanked against the log. He twitched his wrist and held

his grip tight and all was then silent around the circle once more. The fire cracked once between them.

The others arrived, all the captains sporting tired eyes despite not having marched in a few days. Harmodius had a particularly shadowy brow and Basilas remembered his talons had held the night shift the previous evening.

Basilas knew from talking to the infantrymen that the line soldiers were fatigued as well. It wasn't the day-to-day work of a legionnaire that weighed on anyone. It was the fact that they'd fought a campaign against the Sprawlings, marched south and found an enemy to fight within the ranks of their own allies, and now turned again to march farther away from home against more shadowy enemies who were also citizens.

Basilas wondered how many of the rank-and-file legionnaires knew men in either Bardylis's or Zagros's armies. Some of the war gryphons would've grown up together in the capital or mountain roosts of Bastia. Zagros and Gaius certainly had their history, as did some of the other officers from noble families. This campaign would be like those of Attalus fighting Tratus, brother against brother, friend against friend.

The prima captain turned his eyes over to Gaius, thoughts flickering about. The general stood up. He crossed his arms in front of his chest.

"We must march, it's time." The general paused and looked at the men around the circle. "Begin breaking camp tonight. Hold the walls until the morning, but we move at first light and head south to Gura."

There was some shifting among the men. Captain Argos brushed back the hair dangling over his forehead, a grin spreading across his face.

Gaius ignored the rippling. His eyes stared at the fire. Basilas decided to help his general with a few words.

“Zagros hasn’t shown himself. Not even a single gryphon.” Basilas stayed seated and rubbed his hands together, Pothos’s sheath clanking against the log again with his movement. “We’ll push to Gura and hold the city. It’s a strong point in the barrier between south and north.”

There were some nods in response. Basilas met the eyes of Air Captain Martius and the boy smiled. The gryphons would be happy with movement and a new stretch of sky to scout.

“Yes,” Gaius agreed with a finger pointed at Basilas. “But we must be cautious. We can’t thrust forward and overextend and give the enemy an easy win.”

Basilas craned his neck to look up at Gaius and felt a sudden coldness run down his spine.

“We’ll split part of the legion. We need to hold this northern pass well. Lectra is as important as Gura to guarding the path north.” Gaius spoke easily, but Basilas had known the man long enough to sense the tension in his voice and the tightness of his neck.

The prima captain could guess why the general would be rigid. He knew what the next words would be.

“Prima Captain Basilas will stay with a contingent of talons in this position. The rest of the legion will march to Gura and secure the city as we scout farther south for the enemy.”

Basilas was on his feet before he knew what his body was doing. He couldn’t possibly leave the main army. Not when Gaius needed him so badly.

Gaius looked at Basilas. His mouth was a knowing, grim line. The prima captain met his friend’s eye and held his tongue, but only with significant effort.

“Martius, choose two war mounts to stay with Basilas’s force. The rest fly south,” Gaius said next. Martius nodded his understanding. The general then turned to the other company commanders. “I don’t expect trouble on the road, but keep your men alert and ready. We have plenty of supplies to get us there and will restock once we reach the garrison. I have word that Zagros’s main army hasn’t been spotted in the area in months.”

“We’ll find them,” Argos said from the other side of the fire.

Gaius nodded. “We will.”

Basilas focused on his breathing. He took a deep inhale in and tried to hold it but only managed a few moments before letting it rush out of him. He couldn’t argue with Gaius in front of the men. The military thinking behind the strategy was sound, but he would find something to refute once the others were gone.

The men stood slowly, first on one side of the fire and then the other, breaking up the circle. They saluted their general and Gaius uncrossed his arms to return the gesture and sent them off. The night would be busy.

Basilas was *first* spear. He led *First* Company. They were supposed to always be on the front lines.

As the officers left, the general’s great gryphon Volgus padded up to the fire circle. Basilas hadn’t noticed him before, but the war beast must’ve been sitting in the shadows and waiting patiently for his rider.

“You disagree.” Gaius took the reins hanging off the side of Volgus’s towering head. He didn’t look at Basilas.

“No, I don’t want to split our forces.” Basilas shook his head, frustration breaking through his tone like a siege wall finally giving way. “I need to march to Gura with you. We shouldn’t be weakening the legion.”

“We shouldn’t, you’re right,” Gaius said. He stroked Volgus’s feathers with his free hand and glanced sideways at Basilas as if to make sure the prima captain was still there and hadn’t stomped off angrily into the night. “But we haven’t found the enemy. They could be waiting for us to march to Gura only to slip past along the northern coast and make for Carnassus.”

With considerable effort, Basilas clamped his mouth shut and exhaled through his nose loudly. The general had final say.

Gaius dropped the reins and stepped toward his friend. “I’m sorry, I really am. I should’ve told you beforehand. But I knew we’d argue and I wanted to be decisive and without doubts.”

Basilas forced a nod in response.

“I will station the army in Gura and Zagros will show himself,” Gaius said. “Then we’ll know our next battlefield and you can march south to join us or I will march north and link up with you here.” Gaius held out his hand, the invitation there for Basilas to take it and agree with his friend’s strategy.

Basilas did. He gripped Gaius’s hand hard and held for a moment. Then his arm dropped back to his side.

“The instant you find them, you send a gryphon to me.”

“Immediately.”

Gaius turned with these final words and grabbed Volgus by the reins again and led the gryphon around the circle of logs and out through camp. Basilas was left alone with the fire slowly dying. His worries hadn’t abated. But he would obey orders, even if he thought they were incorrect.

* * *

It felt good to saddle Avorian for something more than a simple scouting mission. They were only monitoring the march, not flinging themselves into the adventure of battle, but at least the legion was on the move underneath them.

Avorian hopped back and forth on his front claws as Martius buckled the last of the straps of his harness. All the mounts were armored and the freshly polished metal gleamed in the red morning light around the pen. Martius finished with Avorian and gave the great gryphon a pat on the neck.

Two scouts landed behind them. Air Captains Phalas and Archus dismounted in unison and made for Martius.

“Report?” Martius said. He bent and picked up his breastplate and hoisted it over his head while the men answered.

“The road is clear south. The desert is empty, as always,” Archus said.

“The other side of the river is clear as well. This entire region may as well be deserted, or Zagros is as good at hiding as a Dragonlander,” Phalas added.

Martius nodded his thanks. He cinched his sword belt tight around his waist and shifted his shoulders under the new weight of his armor. “Get your mounts some food and rest. Yourselves as well.”

Both men were designated to stay with Basilas and First Company, guarding Lectra and the northern roads. Neither man had been happy about it, as Martius would’ve been had he been in their place. But the lead air captain had to choose someone.

Basilas himself seemed to object to Gaius’s plan. Martius had seen the prima captain stomping around the camp and sulking in corners as the other

companies made ready for march. The rider halfway worried there'd been a falling-out within the legion's leadership or some larger tension had built up between the two friends.

But for Martius, the Fifteenth marched where he wanted. His heart had jumped when Gaius had relayed the orders. Gura, ancient bastion of civilization, simmering with danger and magic. He would soon see the great pyramids and the palaces of an elder people for himself. He'd visit their markets and see the golden barges slinking along the river. Vipsanius and Demeter had marched and fought and become legends in the legion's destination.

The rider smiled wide as he swung into Avorian's saddle. The other air captains gathered close, their mounts in various states of readiness strewn about the pen. Ponderas and Ptolemas each tried to tug a blanket away from the other with their beaks. Anshas, Ponderas's rider, snapped and pulled them to attention.

"Everyone ready?" Martius looked over the men.

"We're flying into a trap," Anshas muttered a bit too loudly.

No one reacted to the response. Everyone was used to Anshas playing up his dour nature and Martius even found his own grin growing at the words.

"All right, then," he said to the others. "Let's fly at last."

Men ran to their mounts and Martius waited for each to lift off. He nodded to each as they snapped their war gryphons into flight. Even Anshas threw a content grin back his way. Ponderas let out a screech as she leaped with her wings stretched out and flapping to power them away.

Clavius was the last besides Phalas and Archus. The newest air captain still diligently worked on Ptolemas's saddle. He threw a smile Martius's

way as he finished with the final straps. He was fully adapted to the air cavalry ways now, if a bit slow with the mundane tasks of the unit.

Martius nodded and then kicked Avorian into motion to follow the others. He didn't need the reins and kept his balance with only his thighs tight to Avorian's side. The deconstructed camp fell away below them and Martius saw the column of infantry legionnaires from the vanguard marching south. Hope and pride and desire swelled up within his chest and he blinked back a brief bit of moisture from his eyes. The wetness had come from the rush of cold air at higher altitudes—they certainly weren't tears—but he couldn't deny the love of the legion burning brightly within him.

He was home. If Avorian was present and the army was marching to another adventure, he could be at peace.

Like Curia's legionnaires trekking to Memnas before, Martius flew for glory. They would crush their new enemies. The rider would face off against Air Captain Goras and take revenge for Carnassus and everything every rebel had done to the empire.

They would win for Talia.

The thought of the empress briefly turned his mind to the north, far away from the legion's task. Talia would be in the capital and would bury her father soon and begin to lead Belgada. There was much fighting still to go before she was safe.

All of this, the marching and the future fighting and Martius's worries, were for her. She would be safe if they could win this war. And perhaps Martius would return to her and be able to visit the palace and Avorian could fly with Axias on a bright spring day in peacetime.

But first, they had to find their enemy.

Chapter 3

The wind blew over the hills and rustled the petals of the wildflowers and the cloaks of the citizens gathered on the slopes. Talia's lower lip quivered along with the fluttering. She fought to hold it steady, but her breath kept catching and her composure grew more difficult with each passing moment.

The procession with her father's body trudged closer among the hills toward a hole with a mound of dirt beside it. The fields here covered the remains of all great Belgadans. Consuls, senators, generals, and emperors all fertilized the soil together, providing rolling fields of bright flowers as a reminder of the greatness of the past. Titus, Talia's father and the fourteenth emperor of the Belgadan Empire, would be the next to grace the realm below the dirt.

Talia hadn't had the strength to look upon her father's dead body or his cold face since her return to the city. The palace medical staff had offered, the healers beckoning her up to the emperor's quarters, but she had refused each time. The daughter didn't want that image in her memories. Visions of him in his sickbed from before were bad enough. She fought to pull forward memories from her childhood in his healthy days to dominate her mind instead.

Titus was always joyful, interested in learning something new every day. Reading and gardening. Growing vines and bright flowers on the palace terraces. Worrying about his citizens.

He was a great parent. She would miss him, and so would the empire.

These were all words that could be spoken over the gathered throngs here to remind them, inspire them. But Talia wouldn't speak. The gathering was silent. All eyes tracked the Aptorian Guards who carried the pallet with Titus's body. He was covered in a cloth, shrouded from Talia's eyes. The wind blew over the blanket but didn't move the tight fabric. It was still and dead like the body underneath.

Gryphons perched on the hilltops behind the crowds. Some of the beasts stood alone, stretching out wings and rustling head feathers. Others sat with reins held by their riders. Talia sought out Axias and located her quickly at the very center of the gathering but apart from the lesser mounts around her. The imperial mount sat back on her haunches, neck erect, and stared at Talia, her eyes never wavering. She fretted about the empress.

Everyone worried for the empire. There was a new civil war and generals and senators fighting over the power her father had left behind. The imperial seat would pass to Talia if the capital would have her. Axias wanted more than anything to protect her rider from that inevitable and heavy burden.

Talia snapped her jaw shut to fend off more quivering behind her lips. She strengthened her spine and set her shoulders just as her father's procession passed. Her hardened eyes stared at the mound under the cloth and she valiantly fended off all emotion.

She would be strong and prove to the citizens, most especially the nobles gathered, that she was worthy of her father's throne. Were the Tyrhian Captain Halys in Talia's position, the warrior would present a wall of strength. Talia would do the same.

Composure was what the empire needed. Air Captain Martius and General Gaius and the loyal legions fought to secure her place atop the empire. The least she could do was fight for them here in the rear within the palace.

She could put up that façade, at least for the funeral. What she would do afterward, when it was finally time to lead and take control and order senators and legions about, she didn't know. Talia wanted more than anything for someone to talk to about this, like the understanding ear of Martius. But there were too many pressing issues, great and pertinent all, crowding her mind and the brave air captain was far, far away.

Shifting came from Talia's right as the former emperor's pallet approached its final destination. Talia turned her head and looked up at the towering form of Verstappas, her personal Aptorian.

The bodyguard had refused the honor of carrying the emperor with the guards. He hadn't explained his reasoning, but Talia could understand his shame at Titus's assassination under his watch. The Aptorian had also taken a vow to protect Talia at all costs and wouldn't leave her side when outside the palace.

The dissonance with this action was that he also didn't carry a sword. It was some ancient stubbornness from where he was born: the Scipian Mountains in the far south holding the passes to the Rantum Empire.

The guard only carried a shield loose down at his side, his bulging left arm twitching every so often under the weight. His armor was freshly shined without dents or scratches. The guard must be sweltering in the sunlight, even with the cool breeze. But the man showed no weakness. He never wavered.

Talia had lost track of the funeral proceedings. She focused back on the pallet and found that her heart beat as stiffly as the Aptorians moved. They strained under the weight and their arms shuddered as they stopped by the hole and lowered him to the ground. The body stayed tightly wrapped in white.

Talia thought she spotted a lock of long hair fall out from under the bundle. But it was only for a moment and the sight was gone quickly as the guards lifted the body and walked it to the grave.

Her father was rolled into the hole and was gone. Talia closed her eyes and the world left her for a moment. There was only her sadness along with the soft glow of Axias's presence. When her eyes reopened, she didn't look at the grave and the Aptorians shoveling dirt on the body. She glanced up the hill and found her mount, stoic and strong. Faithful. Sturdy.

Gryphons were adept at mourning. They needed space and time, but they processed their emotions efficiently. Each mount moved to their next bonding. They held memories close to their heart while flying into their next journey.

Talia didn't see how she'd ever get over this loss.

All about her were the nobles of Belgada. They feigned sadness. All schemed for ways to get her off the throne.

Her family had been torn apart, from within and without.

Talia couldn't let the entire line crumble. The Lentilians wouldn't be pushed aside.

She blinked and failed to keep a drop of moisture from escaping her eyes. It tumbled down her cheek and dropped to the dirt. The Aptorians packed the dirt down level with their boots and raked it to be organized and clean.

The surrounding wildflowers rustled in the wind. Talia's father was gone.

The crowd dispersed and sound returned to the world with their murmurings and chatter that only grew the farther they moved from the grave. Talia stayed rigid with Verstappas and everyone gave them a wide berth. As the last of the nobles trickled away, Axias came down the hillside and trotted up to Talia. Verstappas didn't object as the princess mounted and kicked her gryphon into the sky and left him behind. Talia looked at the clouds, away from her father's fresh grave. They soared over the fields that grew from Belgada's past heroes and headed back toward the city.

Axias probed gently at Talia's emotions and took a looping scenic route back to the palace. The hills jutted from the expanse of the city in the distance.

They swept over farm fields and a military outpost used for training. There was a quarry they circled and looked down into and then swept low over the fields of flickering wheat just beyond.

There was a farm complex, a barn and a series of store rooms and a house. A little girl sat on the front steps of the homestead and stared up at the gryphon as they flew over. She waved, unaware of who rode the majestic beast, and smiled without a worry in the world.

Talia longed to be that girl. They could switch places and others could lead and Talia could live in peace with Axias. But the rulers of Belgada needed to be worthy. They needed to protect citizens like little girls on quiet farms.

That was Talia's burden. Her charge.

They left the fields and flew over the city's outer walls and higher over the slums and the towering complexes of the wealthy before banking

around the Hill of Belgadus and climbing to the gryphon tower at the top of the imperial palace.

The gryphons around the terrace pool scattered to give space and then reconvene to greet Axias, social and happy. Talia dismounted and pushed through the crowd of gryphons. Her walk was stilted as she entered the palace. Her muscles were tight. The halls stood dark and the building closed in around her. She made her way to her quarters and dwelt on her first actions as empress.

* * *

Movement kept Talia's mind from crumbling. She imagined this was how Halys and the Tyrhians dealt with stress. They wouldn't allow it space to breathe. Those sea women were always moving and working and sailing toward their next destination. Talia couldn't be as mobile, but she could act and try to find some momentum.

The palace compressed if she stayed in one room too long and the weight of the building and her father's throne at its top was always present around her shoulders. But if she focused on her next task and tried to take the next step in the journey to consolidate power, she felt better and somehow more competent.

And this was all in her first few days.

Verstappas took long, slow strides beside her. Talia did her best to ignore the hulking figure.

She hadn't thought of the Scipian as an oppressive shadow in a long while and she chided herself at the thought now. The bodyguard was good and strong and had been loyal to her family. He was still faithful to them and was an ally needed to keep the throne secure.

The palace hallways grew gloomier the deeper into the complex they descended. Talia couldn't remember ever going down this far before. There was certainly no sane reason she would've visited the prison cells between the palace and the senate building.

All sorts of imperial enemies had been housed in this jail. The Sprawling Tyonix had rotted here after his defeat to General Attalus. Arces Curia and his conspirators were imprisoned after their betrayal of the then Emperor Attalus. There were others Talia would've learned about in her childhood lessons but had forgotten. Martius would know them by heart, of course.

The organized stone floors of the palace fell away to a rocky walkway, undulating with age. Two guards stood over a doorway wrought out of iron at the end. These soldiers held their long spears at their sides and their ceremonial senate armor glimmered brightly even in the low light. Their stern faces didn't lift at the empress's approach.

Verstappas stiffened. There was a rivalry between the Aptorians and the senatorial guard, Talia knew, the same as the senate and the emperors always clashed.

The door creaked open and a guard stepped out of the prison. He started at the sight of Talia, but then put on a grin worthy of the best thespians.

"Empress Talia, how nice to see," he said. There was no greeting for Verstappas. "Your father's funeral was lovely. So sorry for your loss, once again."

Talia forced a smile in return. "Thank you, Captain Pythias."

The guard finally took a glance at Verstappas, who stood a foot taller than him. The Aptorian's advantage was height and reach, whereas the senate guard leader held power behind a stocky frame. Pythias seemed almost as wide as the door behind and just as strong as its iron.

This man led the senate guard and his personal qualms against Verstappas, a foreigner, did little to quell the tension in the room.

"What brings you to the cells this evening? This is no place for the imperial family."

Talia open her mouth to respond, but Verstappas was quicker.

"Here to speak to the prisoner."

He didn't need to specify which one and thankfully Pythias didn't play dumb.

"Don't let him infect your mind." Pythias shook his head and then held Talia with a hard stare. "He's dangerous, Empress."

Talia straightened her spine. "So are most men."

Pythias betrayed the briefest of pauses, a startled silence.

"Yes, so they are," Pythias said after a few blinks of his hard eyes. The guard took a step forward and stole another glare up at Verstappas.

In response to the movement, the Aptorian shifted in front of Talia, forcing Pythias to shift around him. Talia blinked and missed much of the movement, but she thought the two guards with spears by the door tensed, their grips tightening on the long weapons.

Pythias chuckled once he was around them and left without further words. Verstappas adjusted the shield on his larger left arm. He shook his head and faced the doorway. The remaining guards allowed them to enter.

Inside, the ceiling was low and the hallways cramped. Talia didn't look forward to walking deeper into the cells. She set her eyes forward and made to push through her fears. But Verstappas held out an arm and directed her into a room right off the entrance hall. The prison guards would bring Bardylis to her.

Verstappas stood by the door of the new room and Talia paced to the far wall. There were torches here that cast flickering shadows but provided more light than the other parts of the dungeon. The pair didn't have to wait long.

The consul who had led the rebellion against her father was escorted through the door. Talia's breath caught in surprise. He wasn't in chains. He wore a clean and freshly pressed toga instead.

His face was clear and just as bright as Talia remembered. His eyes were still sinister and scheming. No dirt graced his hands despite residing in this miserable place below the senate for months.

Talia thought he'd be treated much worse based on his crime and the enemy leaders she'd seen led through the streets in the past. But the man who'd murdered her father was at ease and in comfort.

"Empress," Bardylis said, giving a bow of his head that was far from genuine.

"I see you're being treated fairly." Talia ignored his mocking with a jest of her own.

The fallen consul held out his hands to either side. "I am."

Verstappas remained silent, looming between the captive and his empress. Talia had come down here for a reason but now she had trouble remembering it. Her mind swam and she soon realized there was anger

bubbling up within her. A fire engulfed her emotions. Not even Axias, far above her, could help quell the rising sensation.

This was the man who conspired to overthrow and kill her father. He'd sent assassins into her family's home and stabbed the ruler of Belgada in the back. This man schemed to capture Talia and imprison her. The empress still remembered the consul smirking at her on the deck of the prison ship.

Talia was lucky to have escaped that snare. This man was cunning; even behind bars he was dangerous.

"I came to ask you about your rebellion," Talia said after a deep breath. "Why did you seek to overthrow my father? Why toss the empire into turmoil?"

"The same reason all the senators above us fight for power." Bardylis waved a hand at the ceiling. "Same as all great men throughout history, all the way back to Harpalus and his generals."

"Power," Talia repeated. "You rebelled for more, even though you already had enough wealth and fame and..." Her voice trailed off. Its strength gone.

Bardylis scoffed. Then his mouth turned up into a sneer. "Don't use that tone. This isn't a disease, at least not a malicious one. Men striving for greatness is what makes the empire great. It's what pushes us to further heights. Your father didn't understand and neither do you."

The empress swore she saw one of the escort guards behind Bardylis nod his head. A coldness gripped the base of her neck as her earlier anger receded. Bardylis could have friends remaining in this complex. Other men like him could target Talia's own back with their knives.

If it hadn't been clear before, her precarious situation was solidified. Bardylis was held securely in this prison. But more enemies would rear up

to strike at her if she wasn't careful.

"I'm just another man in the long line of Belgadans who push the empire forward." Bardylis's sneer dropped into a serious line. He held out his clean hands again. "I'm just another great man."

"One who will be executed."

Bardylis blinked. Talia hadn't held back on the blow.

Even great men fear death, Talia thought to herself. This rebel had failed due to the strength of the empire and the braveness of its loyal legionnaires. Her father was gone, but she would continue his fight.

Talia opened her mouth to order the guards to take the prisoner back to his cell. She had half a mind to tell them to put him in chains, but she stopped herself. Cruelty, even with all her anger swirling within her, wasn't her path.

"True," Bardylis said when Talia hesitated. "But you are naïve if you think you're safe. There's already another rebellion in the south."

Talia didn't respond. She flicked out her hand to signal the guards. Bardylis grinned as he turned to the door with the sentries. His expression was the same as if they were back at a banquet in peaceful times and the consul merely talked with the emperor's daughter over a glass of wine and various trays of dates held out by servants. Talia glared after him and dwelt on her coming trials as the disgraced consul's words echoed within her mind. He threw a final sentence over his shoulder as he reentered his prison.

"This struggle is far from over."

Chapter 4

Two rivers, the Cyna and the upper portion of the Gura, merged and pushed north from the city. Martius and Avorian had seen their meandering paths converging from the air. But as they approached the city on foot with the legion, the actual meeting was hidden from their eyes by towering walls.

The gateway before them was stone like Belgada's but hued the color of desert and worn by sand and wind and time. Two weathered sphinxes sat atop obelisks guarding the entrance. Martius spotted stone pyramids jutting from the central city, as well as the remains of an ancient gryphon head carved in the same ochre and yellow stone. The city of Belgada may have been larger, but its hills hid much of its vastness while standing within. Gura was flat and endless.

Martius walked at the very front of the legion beside Gaius and held Avorian's reins. The Fifteenth tramped behind them in a long, dusty column and Volgus flew above with the air corps. It would be late afternoon by the time the rearguard reached the gate.

But at least they'd finally made it. No Gurian honor guard welcomed them. No delegation appeared from the city at all; not even a messenger from the Belgadan garrison came to greet Gaius.

"That's to be expected," Gaius said to Martius, halfway under his breath. Both men passed under the shadow of the gate into the clamoring city.

“Who’s the garrison commander here?” Martius’s eyes darted across all the Gurians going in and out of the storefronts along the alleyways of this main street.

“It’s a smaller force, not a full legion.” Gaius’s eyes darted and Martius realized it was for a different reason than observing the sights of the city. The general was on high alert. “They will have control of the main thoroughfares. But we should be watchful and stick to this path.”

Martius agreed. They’d only marched a block into the city and there were already masses of Gurians glaring at them. There were pockets at the mouths of alleyways and they huddled and pointed and shot smoldering glances at the legionnaires.

These locals wore brown or black garb. Many covered their faces against sand and wind with cloth that cast their eyes in darkness. The bright armor and red dye of the Belgadan uniforms sorely stuck out and marked the soldiers as unwelcome foreigners.

From Martius’s readings, he knew the citizens hadn’t fully accepted Belgadan rule after Attalus’s conquest over one hundred years ago. Harpalus and his general Vipsanius had found the same stubbornness centuries earlier. And even decades after Belgadan influence had permeated, other generals like Curia during the Memnas Campaign hadn’t been able to use the city as a refuge. The citizens had sided with General Khora and Locria and forced the Belgadan side to camp upriver.

Martius stopped his mind from delving too deep into historical issues. The Fifteenth marched freely into the city. The Gurians were not their enemy. They should be allies. Belgada was here to fight off Zagros and the rebel legions, not reignite ancient qualms.

“Here’s the market,” Gaius said.

The words were an afterthought from the general, but Martius nearly stopped in his tracks at the sight before him as the road widened and the buildings fell away.

A giant square, almost the size of the Belgadan senate building, stretched out to either side and was filled with tents, camels, and a mass of people. The legion snaked around the perimeter and Martius was swept along with a view of the hawkers selling dates and oranges and cloth and dyes and various other wares he couldn't recognize. Avorian tugged his arm, trying to pull toward one vendor selling assorted nuts.

Chuckling, Martius pulled his mount along. But as they neared the far end of the market, the gryphon's demeanor changed once more. He grew cold, stiff. The rider followed his war beast's gaze and startled at what he saw.

At first, he thought it was a small gryphon, perhaps lame or with some kind of defect. But then he looked closer. The beast was perched on the end of a low wall like a cat. It raised its head as the legion approached and gave Martius a clear view at last.

A sphinx.

Avorian let out a low hiss and ruffled his feathers. The sphinx's head was human, foreign and strange and the glare it shot in the legion's direction made Martius's heart hammer. Its eyes held malice, just like the locals.

The rest of the creature was that of a smaller lion, not dissimilar to a lesser gryphon, and its wings were black with speckles of white throughout. It stretched, dropping its shoulders low with arms splayed forward and its tail curled in the air. It then lay back down and closed its eyes, as if an

entire Belgada war legion appearing along this road was a common occurrence.

The army marched on. One of the city's pyramids loomed ahead next.

"Lots of sights around," Gaius said.

"You and Basilas have been here before?" Martius loosened his grip on Avorian's reins as his mount settled into a normal trot. The beast only glanced back to the sphinx once, as if to confirm the creature wasn't slinking along behind them.

"Yes, many times. In peaceful eras." Gaius gave a shudder. "Last time we were here, it was just before my brother was lost."

Martius swallowed. "Where do you think your brother is now?" he asked. The question hung between them and he knew he should've kept the thought to himself. Gaius answered anyway.

"No idea." The general made a clicking sound behind clenched teeth. "I never do. I would've found him myself and ended this long ago if I could track him. But we're finished with him, even if he has Oxus. My brother has no more power."

"And we have a new enemy to focus on," Martius said.

Gaius nodded in agreement and kept his eyes forward.

The stories he'd heard said Gaius and the legions were on campaign against the Sarissa rebels in the Cyna Mountains when the death of Emperor Soterus had reached them. The army marched north in response and Paulus rebelled out of jealousy and insanity just north of Gura. Gaius's eyes were shrouded in memories, dark and hopeless.

As they neared the pyramid, Martius saw Gurian gryphons for the first time. They looked like lesser mounts or even a smaller breed and they flitted over the rooftops in between the larger buildings and circled the very

top of the towering stone pyramid. These didn't seem like war beasts to Martius's eye. More like messengers or just feral beasts making roost in the city's heights.

All the houses in this quarter were square and stacked on top of each other to form disorganized terraces, covered in tents for shade. Gurians jumped from roof to roof and traversed the city the same as if they were on the main streets and alleys. Groups kept pace with the legion, mainly out of sight except for certain flashes.

The city switched from wealthy-looking areas and nice homes with walls and gates to dirty slums and then to market areas and then back over and over. Even as they neared the pyramid—which Martius assumed was the center of the city and a seat of power—there were beggars on the side of the road.

Every city would have slums of those less fortunate. Belgada had pushed their poor to the sides. The Gurians seemed to have less structure separating wealth and poverty. Martius could hardly imagine the empire's nobles stooping and interacting with their poor citizens or letting them panhandle so near their precious homes.

The boxy buildings fell away on the legion's left and Martius took in a grand view of the pyramid at last. The complex was massive and blocked the sun rising in the east even though it was late in the morning. There was a wide staircase leading up to a small door at the base of the structure. That was the only entrance Martius could see. No one climbed the stairs and only a single sphinx statue guarded the gateway. The Gurians in the plaza below kept well away from even the building's foundation.

“What's the pyramid for?” Martius asked.

Gaius shrugged without looking at the complex. “I think it’s for burials.”

That would explain why the locals avoid it, Martius thought to himself. He’d admittedly not read much about the Gurian culture. The history of Harpalus and the warring empires after him had held stronger to his boyhood mind when reading about this region. Now the rider wished he’d spent more time with the farmer Liturgus’s books on the subject.

Across the pyramid square, Martius spotted familiar red uniforms of Belgadan warriors at last. A pair of soldiers lounged in front of an alleyway. The legionnaires didn’t approach. They only saluted and held their position in the shadows of the buildings.

Something about their stance made Martius narrow his eyes to try to get a better look. The distance was far and the shadows dark. He wrote off his feeling as just a trick of the bright sunlight and the worries of being in a new place. Though he couldn’t help but notice that Gaius stared at the soldiers as well. The general shook his head and led the legion on.

“Almost there,” Gaius said after a few more blocks.

Martius’s legs were sore, but he was able to ignore the stiffness with all the new sights around him. Adrenaline pulsed through both him and his mount together and he wasn’t sure which side was its source.

The garrison loomed ahead. The walls were much smaller than the pyramid, of course, but the fortified camp stuck out among the Gurian architecture like a Tyrhian in a ballgown. A wooden defensive wall encircled the normal legionary tents and barracks of a Belgadan outpost. There was a gap of empty street around its perimeter to separate it from the boxy Gurian houses. The locals had disappeared

“No guards,” Gaius said. “Something’s wrong.”

Avorian was tense beside Martius. Adrenaline turned to fear.

Gaius held up a hand and the legion halted. Boots echoed. Martius looked to his gryphon. The mount held his head up, neck erect, gaze glaring at the camp's entranceway. He then twitched as if suddenly distracted and darted his eyes to the sky. His legs remained bent, ready to launch into battle.

Martius dropped his reins to give Avorian full freedom of movement if needed.

Gaius lowered his hand and took a cautious step forward. They crept along and the noise of marching boots resumed behind them. No welcome party came out of the gates to greet them.

They reached the gate and found it open.

"Swords," Gaius said.

A wave of steel sliding out of scabbards crashed behind them.

Soldiers jumped in front of Gaius and pulled the door open slowly. They disappeared inside before reappearing and beckoning the general forward. Martius stuck close on Gaius's tail, as did Avorian.

"Volgus can't see a thing above," Gaius said. He looked to Martius.

The rider shook his head. "Nothing from the other gryphons."

The full air corps was circling the city, pulling in tighter over the garrison by the moment. They would've sent warning through their gryphons to Avorian if there was trouble.

Inside the gate, not a soul could be seen across the entrance field of the camp. The fort felt cramped, compressed within the space in the city. There should've been soldiers about. The leaders of the garrison should be welcoming Gaius and the Fifteenth. Soldiers with shields entered from the street and surrounded Gaius.

“General!”

Gaius spun to the voice as two legionnaires ran around the corner of a building. The general pressed through the newly formed shield wall and met the soldier who’d called him. Martius followed close.

He didn’t hear what the soldiers relayed and Gaius marched ahead too fast for even Avorian to keep up. They rushed to the garrison’s mess hall, the largest building within the fort. Gaius stopped in the doorway, his sword lowering, his mouth hanging open.

Martius reached the general a moment later and peered over his shoulder and found the massacre within.

Bodies were piled on one another, limbs twisted and flies buzzing. The garrison had been cut down and the dead thrown haphazardly into this building and left to rot.

His heart slowed, horror gripping him. Adrenaline was still present, but now there was a focus on survival, an urge to flee. The legion was in a dangerous position.

A horn echoed from far away. It wasn’t a legionary battle call, but something low and guttural and foreign. The noise was quickly followed by others on all sides and the answers moved closer and pressed toward the walls. Avorian’s head darted in all directions with the growing sounds.

“Back to the gates,” Gaius said. His voice was calm, but his steadiness was overwhelmed by the clattering of armor as the men rushed away from the horrid piles of bodies.

The horns continued building on one another and Avorian flashed an image across Martius’s mind. There was smoke over the city now, rising from massive fires set at the crossroads adjacent to the main road. The air corps now wove their flights between the columns of smoke.

“Sir,” Martius said, running up beside the general as they neared the fort gate. “The citizens have lit fires.”

Gaius waved his men out of the fort while frowning at Martius. He then looked to Captain Argos of Second Company. “You hear that?”

“Yes, sir.” The officer flicked his hair backward and shoved his helm tightly down over it. “They’re calling citizens to arms.”

Gaius spat in the dirt. “It’s a signal. We walked right into a trap.”

“From Zagros?” Martius asked. His head was spinning and he couldn’t keep up with proceedings.

Gaius didn’t have time for an answer. The last of his legionnaires were through the gate and he ducked after them, pulling Martius and Avorian with him.

“Get up in the air. Keep contact with me. We need to know where the enemy is coming from.” Gaius nearly tossed Martius into the saddle himself before barreling off, shouting orders to the men.

The soldiers that had remained outside were still in the ranks, but their helmeted heads were darting to both flanks and they pressed close against each other. The formation shifted to point their shields outward. No fighting had begun, but the horns were only growing louder and had been joined by howls, low and rising in octave as they approached.

Martius stuck his foot in his stirrup and swung into the saddle. As Avorian spread his wings, the first of their enemies showed themselves.

Brown garbed men, small in stature and armed with knives, erupted from shadows adjacent to the fort. They threw themselves against the waiting Belgadan shields. The legionnaires hacked back in reply, but the surprise of the attack was strong. Knives bit into gaps in armor and blood spilled across the sandy streets as the formation buckled.

The legionnaires shoved, adjusting to close the new weaknesses in their line. Shields knocked Gurians into each other and compressed to reform their wall. All attackers were quickly cut down or forced to flee.

Order returned to the streets. But the silence was somehow now worse than hearing the screaming enemies close by.

Martius took a final glance at all the shadowy allies that could hold enemies around the infantry and then spurred Avorian upward. The great gryphon rose into the smoky sky at speed.

Up above, the sky was calm and smoky. The smaller gryphons local to Gura were gone and Martius's air corps dominated the sky. But the smog from the Gurian signal fire served another purpose beyond a call to fighting. It obscured their view and added more chaos to the growing pandemonium of the battle.

Avorian looped around the closest gray column and fell in behind the flight of Clavius and Ptolemas. The allied rider threw a hand signal back that relayed the current status. Martius nodded. Avorian broke off his flight. They needed to stay close to Gaius's location, now the rearguard of a Belgadan retreat.

Martius was finally catching up to the rush of the ambush. Gaius had made a choice against attempting to move his entire legion into the garrison within the hostile city. He'd ordered a retreat. But as Martius looked back north along the winding main road they'd traversed on the way in, he realized the Fifteenth had a long and difficult fight out of the city with enemies on all sides.

Like a gust of wind, the direness of their sudden position smacked Martius in the face. He leaned over the saddle and spotted nothing along the adjacent streets near the Second's position. The Belgadans were starting to

turn in their unit formations. There was confusion farther up the column. The going was slow, with men running into each other in the tight street. More enemies burst from shadows and hidden alleyways to take down loose soldiers and then retreated back into the darkness. Martius only saw them once they burst forth in attack. The streets were too covered and narrow in this sector of the city.

Avorian passed his rider visions from the other mounts. Groups of enemies massed farther to the north, with a large contingent at the pyramid and rushing to attack the right flank of the Belgadan company there. The sun had passed its apex and was quickly falling toward the horizon. Darkness wouldn't save the legion, however.

Avorian dropped their altitude and Martius spotted Gaius and passed a hand signal down to the general. He relayed the position of the enemy troops they could see. Avorian rose back to observation height as Martius finished, but he caught a nod in response from the general.

Volgus passed them, soaring along the length of the Belgadan retreat. Gaius would be ordering the great gryphon into position, most likely responding to the enemies around the pyramid. Martius chose to hold his station and wait for Gaius's next orders. Below them, the ambush seethed further into chaos.

Chapter 5

Gaius was constrained in the mass of his men. Armored soldiers jostled into each other and tried to keep a steady retreat up the main road north, but they tripped and tangled and had to stop at every alleyway to hold a shield wall against the continued attacks of the enemy Gurians.

The general wanted to get to the air. He longed to be in Volgus's saddle and have a view of the march and check on all aspects of his army and adjust them to fend off these swarming attacks. But the rear—the original vanguard of his peaceful march into the city—was in the most danger. He wouldn't leave his men on the ground simply because he had a flying war beast at his disposal.

Volgus sent disagreement through their bond. It felt like the beast was glaring at him. Gaius pushed the argument aside for now and let the great gryphon keep circling over the army at the main pyramid.

Gaius needed to get his rear talons up the road quickly. Progress was tough to come by, though. The tide of his men pushed back the way they'd come, but the general felt as if his waves were crashing against a steep bank and going nowhere. They were confined in the streets and surrounded.

"Let me break off here, sir."

On Gaius's right was Captain Argos, leader of Second Company. The veteran had been stationed in Gura as a younger officer and knew the streets the best of any of Gaius's men. The general would take any advantage he could.

“Take two talons and break west.” Gaius nodded in the given direction. “Watch the level of the sun, though. We can’t be separated at dark.”

Argos pushed through the men and yelled orders that were lost within the din of battle to Gaius’s ears. Splitting their force was a risky maneuver. But Gaius wanted to free up some space in the streets for his men to march quicker and he needed more targets for the Gurians to content with. If Argos could create a second flank and move up along the parallel street with speed, the rear could get out of this trouble.

A scream came from Gaius’s left. It was followed by a horn and Gurians streaming out of an adjacent alleyway. One assassin burst from the second-story window of a house above and plummeted onto Gaius. The general flung his sword up and stepped to the side deftly to allow the flying assassin to impale himself on the blade. It was all he could do against the suddenness of the attack.

Gaius’s sword was ripped from his grasp and a knife flashed across his cheek. He spun away and then stepped back to retrieve the weapon from under the body. By the time he stood up, there were enemies everywhere within his ranks.

“Rally here!” The general waved reserves forward. He needed more shields in this position. “Wall formation! Reinforce!”

Those were all the orders he could give before more Gurian knives darted at him. Gaius swiped aggressively at the first enemy and cut clean through the man. Small blades weren’t proper weapons to bring to a battle against a real warrior.

Yet plenty of Gaius’s legionnaires lay bleeding in the streets from this small skirmish. The column left a trail of men in its wake and the fighting here was only going to add more.

Reinforcements arrived as the general swung upward through another enemy. Shields clamped together and shoved the enemy back. Another horn blew, followed by a shrill whistle from a nearby rooftop. The dark assassins retreated, leaping backward into the shadows. Gaius wouldn't allow them to get away freely.

He lunged and grabbed a Gurian by the back of his tunic. He swiped at another with his sword and then cut low through a third, taking off a leg and sending the man tumbling across the stones. His gladius swung around to the first enemy's throat and sprayed blood up a nearby wall. Gaius shoved the man away and let out a battle yell down the dark and now deserted alleyway.

His vision was tinged red, bloodlust rising. One of his soldiers tugged on his cape to pull him back to the formation. Gaius forced himself to follow. He had an excuse to be angry. But he couldn't let loose at the expense of his men.

These Gurians were supposed to be their allies. Belgada kept their city at peace and brought in trade and managed the rebel mountain tribes to the southeast. Why had the city rebelled with such anger?

Was Zagros behind this sudden betrayal?

He had to be. Either him or Gaius's brother Paulus, but he quickly threw that last possibility away.

The general exhaled. He grabbed his chin and twisted his head over to each shoulder, cracking out the stiffness there. There'd be time later to think on the larger matters of this betrayal, but only if they survived.

He called through their bond for Volgus to return. Captain Argos's group hadn't returned yet, but his rear talons were stable in this current position. Through his gryphon, Gaius learned the enemy massing at the

pyramid were now attacking. The general would've liked to wait for contact from Argos before leaving, but there was no time. The battle moved too swiftly.

Volgus landed in the next moment, hovering over the street and dropping vertically down once the legionnaires cleared out space for him. Gaius ran up to his mount. He didn't want to leave the war beast exposed on the ground level for too long. A great gryphon bonded to a legion's general was a prime target for Gurian archers and sling throwers.

Volgus tilted and the general leaped aboard. He legs found a grip down the mount's side and the gryphon launched, Gaius holding his sword aloft as a salute to his men remaining behind. The talons closed ranks and sent cheers skyward after them.

At last, Gaius got a better view of his legion's struggle. Smoke from the fires obscured the scene even more, but Gaius could see the long trail of his men and enemy masses on all sides well enough. The sun sank low and the city cast long shadows over the river and eastern desert.

Volgus wove around a massive column of smoke and broke north, barreling up the line of the legion. The units were broken in places and talons fought apart from each other with stretches of open street between. In other sectors, the men fought to relink with their allies between blockades created by the locals. Some of the signal fires were lit directly on the main road, blocking even more of the path to safety.

The pyramid loomed on his right. Volgus looped back and passed over the square. They found the plaza awash with action.

Legionnaires arrayed themselves in a thin battle line opposite a mass of seething locals. The enemies rushed forward in places and hit the shielded

legionnaires and then retreated only to lash out in another location farther up the line.

A war beast could help break up this attack, but it would be dangerous. Volgus dived anyway.

A flash appeared on Gaius's periphery. Martius and Avorian matched Volgus's dive and struck at the enemy's rear. The general's mount angled away and hit the middle of the Gurian mass. Locals scattered underneath the war beast, flying in all directions.

Gaius hacked at bodies as they flew by. Volgus lifted off before the enemy could reconverge on them. Arrows whistled through the air but Volgus was already away. He banked over the legion's shield wall to rising cheers from their allies. He completed the turn and dropped into another attack on the far side.

Volgus executed two more passes and swung into a third. Gaius merely sheathed his sword and let the gryphon do his worst for the last. The Gurians were helpless before the war beast. As they lifted from the carnage of their final attack, the plaza was nearly clear and the legionnaires were back in a column formation.

Gaius scanned the sky and made to signal an order to Martius and Avorian for them to monitor the line. But instead his eyes were drawn to a new clog of enemies pouring down the street to the north. They attacked the front of the column. Volgus set his wings and dropped straight for the engagement.

The gryphon flew low over his legionnaires and swept away an initial thrust from the Gurians by merely buzzing their front ranks. Volgus then beat his wings into a hover and landed on a rooftop. Gaius craned his neck and could see nothing in the dark alleyways scattered around him. The main

street was still illuminated in the evening's glow. There was a Gurian barricade up the road, freshly built to funnel his men out of their desired path.

Wings whistled overhead and the general looked up to catch Martius's eye on the back of a gliding Avorian. Gaius signaled the young air captain to push away the attackers sweeping in from the north and west. The rider acknowledge the order and Avorian flew out of sight.

It was dark now. Dusk was dying. The legion would fight by firelight soon.

With a flick of his reins, Gaius sent Volgus down over the enemy to strike at the blockage in the street. The barricade was a pile of wood and stones and the gryphon landed and tossed away the largest piece from the top. It struck a building at the side of the street with a great crack.

Volgus reared and enemy sling stones clacked harmlessly against his breastplate. He gave a shriek mocking the enemy and then set to work destroying the full barrier. He dug down into the mound and pushed rocks to the side until a wide-enough path for their foot soldiers was created.

The gryphon leaped back from the debris as the legion pushed its way forward. They landed behind the front ranks and Gaius had a moment of quiet to think and analyze. His soldiers were still being harassed across the pyramid plaza. These Gurians were better trained as warriors and moved in actual military formation.

Gaius dismounted. He pushed away protests from Volgus and pointed the gryphon back to the sky. Martius and Avorian now executed raking runs through the enemies to the south and the organization of the Gurians faltered under their might. Gaius would help here, urging the men onward through the barricade and to hopeful safety. But there was only a little

daylight left to use for this fight. Then the legion would camp for the night in the hostile city.

Screaming and clanging came over the barrier. Gaius marched into the crowd of legionnaires and pushed his way through the barricade's gap.

"Form up!"

Someone else was calling out orders, but Gaius agreed with the initiative. The general fell in with his men as if he were a mere soldier of the line. As he took his place in the front, enemy Gurians charged down the street from the north and burst from alleyways on both flanks.

This wasn't a formal and trained army, like Gaius had glimpsed in the rear. The enemies here were peasants, commoners, and city dwellers. There even looked to be women among the mass.

This was a mob in full riot.

"Forward!" Gaius held command this time, his voice meriting immediate action from the troops.

Boots stomped up the street and the mob faltered. The enemy momentum cracked at the sight of Belgadan shields and bloody swords pointed outward. But the crazed commoners had already committed too far. Most of their number regained composure quickly and charged the rest of the way.

Gaius dropped his sword low and commenced the proceedings with an upward swing, knocking two enemies onto their backs. He swung down next and struck the familiar clang of metal on metal. He parried a blow from another enemy and then hacked back at the first.

Clang. Slash. Clang.

Some of this mob could fight properly. But Gaius didn't have time for duels. He lowered his shoulder and barreled forward. The legionnaire

formation stepped with him, shields protecting the thrust out. Their advance would give room to those behind to push through the barricade.

A flurry of wings exploded overhead and a blur struck the back of the enemy mob. Bodies were flung apart like shrapnel as Volgus's snarls rent the air. If the mob wasn't breaking under the advancing shield wall, they shattered at the appearance of a war beast.

"Line! Form up!"

This was another commanding voice again, seeking to hold the men back from overextending and chasing the enemy.

"Line here! Shield wall!" Gaius added to the orders and felt his men clamp into position as directed. The formation breathed as one, stepping in coordination and settling in together.

The general stepped to the rear and the evening's gloom settled over him. Their enemies disappeared and the legion caught its breath. Night was upon them.

Gaius found a gap among the soldiers pushing through the barricade and watched their progress. After a moment, Avorian fluttered in to land nearby. The general faced Martius as the rider dismounted.

"Rear secure?" Gaius asked.

"Yes, sir." Martius looked unharmed, as did his mount. "We're moving slow, but the path is open."

"For now." Gaius couldn't keep the frustration from his voice.

He tried to quiet his mind and let his thoughts settle, but the sounds of fighting were growing again, this time from the north. It was getting harder to see through the darkness.

"We need contact with the front of the retreat." He then pointed down at the ground. "Stay here and make sure these columns keep moving. When

we get to a strong position, make a fortified camp.”

“Yes, sir.”

Volgus landed, sensing his rider’s desire to get back in the air. The great gryphon trotted around Avorian and dropped his shoulder for Gaius to mount. They took to the sky and the general pushed his worries about his rear and central talons to the side as best as he could. Martius would direct the air corps and protect the men on the ground.

This was a battle the legion hadn’t planned to fight. Organization had to be won before victory could be a possibility.

The Gurian bonfires lit the city below Gaius as they flew north. The smaller flickers of torches, bunched in groups, moved in all directions. They were like swirling fireflies caught up in a tornado, all twisting and turning and pressing around the central roadway that held Gaius’s trapped legion.

The necessary plans formed in his mind before he made contact with the front. Volgus dropped into a landing path near the front gate. This area of the city seemed stable and the legionnaires had built barricades and walls along the streets for themselves and stood guard. Gaius had expected the Gurians to fight hardest to keep the Belgadans enclosed in the city, but the companies here were at ease. Very few torch flickers converged on them.

After landing, the general found Phoras, leader of Sixth Company, and asked for a full status update.

“Holding,” the captain said. “The area’s secure and the enemy’s barely pushing us. I suspect they’re focusing on cutting off the various pieces of our column farther south.”

Gaius nodded. He’d realized the same thing. The Gurians’ goal was to break the legion apart and destroy each piece separately.

“Good work, Captain.” Gaius clamped a hand on Phoras’s shoulder.
“Keep control of the gate. We’re not getting through tonight.”

“Want us to sally back south? We can pull men forward.”

“No.” Gaius gave a stern shake of his head. “If you lose the gate, we’re all trapped. The men will make it here tomorrow.”

The captain saluted and didn’t argue further. Gaius remounted Volgus.

“I’ll be in contact through the gryphons. Be on alert, the enemy isn’t going to let you rest like this all night.”

“No. I’d wager not.”

“In the morning we’re pushing straight for you. Hold your line.”

The captain saluted again and Gaius turned Volgus with the reins and kicked him into the sky. They needed to organize the broken pieces of his legion and order them to hunker down for the night. Daylight was all but gone. They were running short on time.

Chapter 6

Martius's back screamed with stiffness and his shoulders ached from propping up his torso in a prone position on the rooftop for so long. The world was black, but his mind was alive with memories from the day's fighting. The howls and horns of the locals still attacking throughout the dark city didn't help matters.

At least his legs received a rest. They were tight from all day in Avorian's saddle. The gryphon, scouting over the city, wasn't getting much of a break. He checked in periodically on his rider and the units they were hunkered down with and watched for signs of enemy attack.

Air Captain Clavius shifted on Martius's left. He rolled his shoulders, groaned, and rubbed at the back of his neck. Both men stared off the edge of their rooftop down an array of alleys that pushed into the rear of their position. A few talons rested behind makeshift barricades and the men on guard duty stalked the streets or watched from rooftops.

Clavius failed to find a more comfortable position and settled back into his original one. "They're moving into position for the morning," he said.

"Think they're finished for the night?" Martius asked.

The Gurians had attacked them hard as the company built their street blockages for the camp but had backed off once the barriers were complete. Now the enemy merely harassed the position. There were louder horns and rolling howls to the north and south.

“Here? I’d say yes,” Clavius said. “Ptolemas sees nothing and all is relatively quiet. They wait for us to make a move in the morning.”

Martius hadn’t been able to think that far in the future. His mind was too sluggish. Ever since they discovered the massacred garrison, he and Avorian had been rushing about and helping the legion fight for its life. There had been no chance of morning unless they kept fighting in the present.

Now, Clavius’s words spurred his imagination. When daylight hit the city, what would the legion find? What would Gaius order?

“We’ll break down the barricades and start marching again,” Clavius continued. He rolled onto his back and let out a sigh at the release from his shoulders. “Then they attack again and they keep us from linking up with the other talons. The barbarians hit the gate and seek to wall us off in the city. And then they cut us to pieces slowly, keeping us in the city for another day and into the night. All to repeat until we’re dead.”

“I see us fighting out of the city tomorrow.” Martius had never heard Clavius talk in such a dour tone and sought to combat it. Most veteran legionnaires were positive and confident, having seen numerous victories pulled out from seemingly sure defeats. Even Anshas would avoid speaking of complete failure.

But this war, a second consecutive civil war, wore on everyone.

A flicker passed Martius’s line of sight.

“Hold.” Martius reached over and put a hand firmly on Clavius’s shoulders to stop his response. They been talking too loudly and Martius scanned for more movement in the darkness of one of the alleyways.

Clavius rolled back over as quietly as he could. “What is it?”

Martius heard the whispered question but didn't answer initially. He waited and listened to the silence.

Nothing. No further movement appeared. The Gurians kept out of sight.

"Saw someone run across that alley." Martius let out the breath he'd been holding. Clavius did the same beside him.

"They're out there, just waiting." Clavius rolled back over. Smog still remained from the signal fires and blotted out most of the stars. Martius wanted to turn over as well and let his eyes drift closed. But they were on watch duty and couldn't skirt their responsibilities.

Avorian was on alert, which would make sleep difficult for Martius even if he were allowed. The great gryphon circled close to their position to check on his rider once more and then flew south past the great pyramid to check on the army's rear.

The troops there were completely surrounded. Most of Second Company was still intact, but the force was split into two groups and separated by a few blocks. Gurians swarmed all around them. Avorian tracked their torches and bonfires through the city streets.

Martius shivered as his mount passed along a few images. The legion would have to backtrack and help the Second break free in the morning.

The rider was surprised how cold the desert could get. Where the day had been sweltering and not even the wind offered respite, darkness brought a deep chill. Martius couldn't help shaking a little in his thin tunic. He'd left his armor back on the ground level. He felt as if he was up at high altitude with Avorian, soaring through frigid clouds. But there was no wind and he was firmly on the ground, trapped in tight confines with his legion.

Horns erupted on their left. Clavius flipped over immediately. The sound was close and the pair could make out the distinct howls of

individual enemies attacking some of their fellow infantrymen to the north. Avorian sped from the south and swept over their position. Ptolemas did the same coming in from the west.

“Attacking the Fourth,” Clavius said. “That’s close to us.”

“We’ll be next.” Martius hoped he was wrong.

There was clanging and screams of battle mixed in with the howling. All Martius could see was darkness broken by the glow of the bonfires. The flames seemed to be multiplying. Martius asked Avorian for an update, but the gryphon could see little of the fighting. The buildings hid the street where the Gurians attacked.

“Keep Ptolemas in the sky unless we see them being overrun,” Martius said. These were Gaius’s directions. The general didn’t want to risk the gryphons dropping into a night fight if it wasn’t necessary for survival.

“Agreed,” Clavius said. “Last resort.”

Martius listened to the sounds of the skirmishing and tried to settle his heartbeat. He needed to focus back on their watch. The enemy could be slinking silently up on their position while the men were distracted by the fighting close by.

Avorian circled. The Fourth held.

The clanging slowed. The Gurian horns circled out to the east, perhaps moving around to attack Martius’s men next. Eventually, the night became silent again.

“Your watch is up,” Clavius said.

Martius had lost track of time. Fatigue made his mind feel heavy, blurry.

“I can wait until I’m relieved.” The rider shook off the urge to let his eyelids remain closed with each passing blink.

“No, you need to rest.” Clavius’s voice was stern. “You need energy to lead the air corps in the morning. Gaius will find sleep at some point tonight, as would Basilas if he were here.”

Martius swallowed and stayed silent. He knew his friend to be correct, though. It didn’t feel right to leave Clavius on the rooftop.

“I’ll send a replacement immediately,” Martius said as he pushed himself to a crouch and then crept to the doorway down off the building. Clavius returned to watching the alleyway.

Martius stopped halfway down the stairwell and leaned against the wall. He allowed his eyes to close but had to stave off sleep at the sudden sensation of falling forward. He caught himself on the next step and put a hand to the far wall. Sleep was indeed what he needed.

Avorian passed over their position as he emerged from the house and stepped over the legs and curled-up bodies of resting legionnaires. *The Fourth survived*, the gryphon relayed. They were already rebuilding their barricades and setting up new watches. Martius adjusted the sword at his belt.

A horn blew out of the darkness on his left.

A gap of silence followed, only broken by hollering from multiple legionnaires.

“Attack incoming!”

More yells answered them and Martius gripped the hilt of his gladius. He rushed toward the noise and was shocked to see the shadowy figures of Gurians already within the perimeter of their defenses.

“Form here!”

Howls came from the enemy side. The noises echoed all around. Martius did his best to block out the confusion.

The rider drew his sword. Avorian banked around from the south and sped back to their position. Martius ordered him to stay in the sky unless the position became dire, which could be close given the enemies already within the camp perimeter.

A Gurian rushed Martius with two short swords. He wore a black hood and a shawl over his face and materialized out of the chaos like a screaming ghost within a nightmare. Martius hacked at him without hesitation.

His gladius clanged against one of the short swords. The other blade swung low at Martius's stomach. He leaped backward, remembering uselessly that he didn't have his armor. Before he could counter the move with a thrust of his own, a fellow legionnaire tumbled into the enemy.

The Gurian was replaced by another, this one with a regular sword, although curved instead of straight like the Belgadan blades. Martius swung twice and the masked enemy parried both away. Martius fainted a third swipe and then spun through the man's guard to stab up into his stomach. He pushed the enemy away and moved on to help with more of the fighting.

There was no organized line. Multiple barricades in the skinny alleyways had been broken and more enemies poured in.

Two enemies burst from a doorway on Martius's left and he pivoted to face them. They leaped on a legionnaire's shield and the soldier stumbled over a body underneath his feet. Martius shifted out of the way to not lose his own footing but was then off balance as one of the Gurians swiped at him. He only barely parried the blade.

More legionnaires pressed up on the flank and both Gurians soon fought with their backs to the wall of the house they'd used for entry. A spear thrust ended the first and the second was hacked down a moment later, falling to his knees and then being punctured by multiple sword tips.

Martius caught his breath and looked at his sword. It was bright red, matching the stones at his feet. Bodies were piled everywhere. The flow of Gurian attackers slowed.

Avorian gave a call up above and Martius waved him off. The gryphon didn't see any more torches converging on the position.

"Reform!"

The order came from behind Martius and the men responded by pulling their wounded backward and then shifting forward to reinforce the broken barricades. Martius heaved in a breath and walked toward the voice. It belonged to a lieutenant from Third Company named Gobryas. They'd only spoken briefly, but he was in charge of this talon and Martius would offer his help where he could.

"Avorian's above if we need," Martius said.

The lieutenant gave a tired grin. "I think we're fine. The barricades shouldn't need any heavy lifting. Their attacks are just to keep us awake."

Martius nodded. That appeared to be the Gurian strategy.

"Get some sleep, sir," Gobryas said.

That was all anybody wanted him to do, except the enemy swirling around their position. Martius certainly needed it, but now adrenaline was pulsing through him and it would be hard to settle down, even if there were a quiet space he could find.

He shook his head. "I'll try, Lieutenant."

Martius didn't get a chance. Almost immediately after walking away from Gobryas, Avorian sent an update.

The rider angled toward the rear of camp and soon the massive shape of Volgus fluttered down into a vertical landing between the buildings. General Gaius dismounted and launched straight into discussion.

“Keep holding for now, but we break at first light.” The general didn’t ask for a status update. Martius could imagine that all the units spread throughout the city were in similar states. If the soldiers still held their positions, it meant they were as strong as could be. “We’ll have to split part of the group, only a talon or two, and link back up with the Second behind you. All must then quickly thrust for the gate.”

“Yes, sir. What do you want of the air corps?”

Gaius paused. He glanced to Volgus, who stood silently waiting for him.

“We need to keep them over the city.” There was a bite to the general’s words, as if he regretted having to say them. “At some point we need to contact Basilas. Though for now our priority is the survival of the infantry. We must break out of the city before asking for help.”

“Zagros’s army is still out there as well, sir.” Martius had almost forgotten about their original enemy. The Gurians weren’t the only rebels against the empire. “Basilas needs to watch the northern roads.”

“Exactly,” Gaius said. The general’s eyes scanned over the legionnaires in various states of rest or in positions of defense around the street. “I’ve had contact with most of them, but what are the positions of your riders?”

Martius launched into it. “Avorian is patrolling the line. I’m down here. Clavius is finishing a watch soon with us but will return to Ptolemas and hold the air above the Second through morning. Marzio is back with the Second as well. Ponderas will be over the Third, which leaves Tarchus and Justus for the north, sir. Phalas and Leos are with Basilas.”

“Where do you need Volgus?”

“Wherever you see fit, General.” Martius didn’t think it was his place to order Gaius into a position. “Volgus and Avorian will need to be everywhere. You order us where you need us.”

Gaius scratched under his chin. Volgus huffed impatiently behind them, ready to return to the sky.

“I’m patrolling north and will check on the gate.” Gaius grinned as he climbed into the saddle, though. There was more fatigue than mirth behind the expression. “Good work, Captain. Be ready to move soon.”

“Yes, sir.”

Martius stepped back to give Volgus room. It was a slow liftoff, with the gryphon climbing vertically given the narrow street. But the beast gained the darkness of the open sky and moved off into the night to keep patrolling the strung-out lines of the legion.

There was now a hint of a sunrise forming in the east. Martius could see it in the gaps of the buildings over an alley. There would be no space for rest. Action was approaching again and Avorian was already banking around the rear of the legion to return to his rider. Neither one of them would find sleep tonight.

Chapter 7

Martius stood, sword drawn and ready, as the legionnaires before him broke apart the barricade that had protected their northern flank throughout the night. The rider's adrenaline was building to give him a new wave of energy, but his eyes burned and he knew his strength wouldn't last forever.

There was tension throughout the men of Third Company. Martius could guess the same feeling stretched up the length of the road to all the soldiers. He'd taken a patrol flight in the early morning. He and Avorian had stayed high, looking along the main street they were to traverse and all the alleyways and nooks throughout the city where the enemy would be hiding.

Martius took a steadying breath. He was tasked with monitoring the company's advance along with helping pull the Second forward in the rear. The full plan was for the legion to compress, starting from the back, and move forward until the entire army could congregate at the gate and break out together. If the gate fell, as General Gaius worried it would, they would have the largest force possible from the road to retake it.

Avorian hovered above the barricade before Martius as it was dismantled and the open street emerged beyond. The stones were clear except for two bodies of Gurian attackers flung to one side. Captain Graccus flicked out a hand signal. A talon moved forward. Martius crept

along in the rear, sword in hand, and expected howls and a flurry of knives to greet them at any moment.

But no attack came. The path was clear and the entire company filed out of their nighttime fortress in silence.

“Column,” Graccus said from nearby. It wasn’t the yelled order normally found within a legionary maneuver. The whisper was relayed back up the line and men shifted into place.

Their column kept a gap down the middle as the soldiers focused on the flanks. Martius walked within this opening behind Graccus and stole a glance to the sky where Avorian matched their pace. The gryphon saw nothing of the enemy. But this was their city and the Gurians were good at hiding.

When Martius had marched at the front of the Fifteenth’s column with Gaius on the way into the city, the main street had seemed broad and the city alive with activity and hope. Now it was dead, and the path was confined with the buildings far too close on all sides. There was danger everywhere.

Howls exploded behind the column. Martius spun and found the Gurians jumping on the last of the legionaries as they emerged through the barricade. Captain Graccus rushed past Martius, screaming out orders. Avorian maintained his altitude and Martius held his own position. More attacks would be incoming from other positions.

The rider watched as his allied legionnaires fended off the knife-wielding Gurians. They parried the ambush, but the goal of this initial attack was only to draw eyes in the wrong direction. Avorian gave a warning at the same time Martius felt the trap.

He turned to face the direction of their march and saw the path forward now closing in a mass of men. An army of Gurians charged down the street and the front shield wall barely found time to close together. Black-clad assassins slammed against the rectangles of Belgadan steel and the legionnaires grunted and braced themselves with boots skidding across the stones. Martius rushed forward to command the defense. Graccus was still focused on the rear skirmish.

As the rider reached the front, reinforcements were already plugging holes punched in their line. The shield wall was close to breaking. More Gurians poured against the flanks now, appearing from shadows that were yet to be touched by the sun of the new day. Martius ignored the danger at either side of his advance and flung himself into the main battle.

He ducked under a sword swipe from a Gurian and slashed across the enemy's exposed stomach. The man gave a gurgling cough and collapsed forward. Martius was already onto his next target.

More and more enemies appeared, like a rising black tide. Avorian cawed a warning through their bond and showed further Gurians massing up the street and forming into an actual military formation to reinforce their attack. Martius couldn't react to this news just yet. The front of his column was almost overwhelmed.

He brought his gladius high for the next attack and crashed it down on the head of a Gurian. On his left, another enemy clambered over the shield of a crouched legionnaire. Martius barreled through the man with a lowered shoulder but then stumbled on a tangle of bodies. Legionnaires came to his aid and hauled him up. They swung sword and shield alike to protect him and pull him back into position. The entire march had ground to a halt.

But Martius could feel the Gurian momentum slowing as well. Their initial surprise had worn off. The enemy might be better rested and have more attackers than the Belgadans, but the Fifteenth's resolve was strong.

"Talons of the Third, to me!" Martius tried to use the voice that he'd heard from Gaius and Basilas numerous times in past battles. He wanted to exude authority and confidence and he was surprised at how well his words carried. The men responded to his call.

They hacked away at the remaining Gurians and those enemies still standing fled into the buildings and alleyways up the street. The Belgadan shields reformed and Martius stepped back into the gap down its middle to find Graccus arriving to the same space. Both the officers exchanged nods and stood catching their breath. Then Martius remembered Avorian's scouting from up ahead.

"More Gurians farther forward." He realized it would appear he was stating the obvious and sought to clarify. "Avorian says there's a formation of them blocking the street."

Graccus pursed his lips and said nothing. He called out further orders to his front ranks and the head of the column solidified itself. Martius glanced to the sky, seeking to find his gryphon, but his eyes caught a flicker of movement along the rooftops. The enemy was above them as well. Avorian was already tracking this danger.

They rounded a corner and found a mass of enemies waiting for them. Howls came from the Gurians at the sight of the Belgadans. The legionaries banged swords against shields in response.

Martius felt a swelling within his chest, his resolve strengthened by adrenaline and pride. The Gurians rushed and Graccus called a halt for his men. Shields came together once more. The enemy was a mass of crazed

knives and bared teeth and howling mouths. The legionnaires were disciplined, one unit working together.

Martius's confidence nearly evaporated at the first crush of men against shields. The Belgadan column buckled backward, with the front line toppling to the stone street and Gurians hacking at every bit of exposed flesh they could find. The initial wave pressed the men backward to Martius's position three rows deep. He lowered a shoulder and pushed against the flow. Every soldier strained and at last the pressure loosened, but the snarling and howling and the war horns only increased. The legion bit back with swords, but strained to hold itself together.

Suddenly, the attack broke, like a dam had cracked on the far side and the Gurians swept out like lake water long dormant. Martius looked up, a screech ripping the air, and discovered what caused the breaking.

Avorian had struck the enemy in their exposed rear. Wings and talons and a sharp beak tore through the enemies and tossed men in the air and slammed them against the street and adjacent buildings.

Third Company resumed its advance and hacked at the now fleeing Gurians. Avorian lifted off, trailing men clutched in his claws below before hurling them over a rooftop and out of sight. Martius cheered his mount but also urged him to fly to safety through their bond. The company now had the freedom of movement it needed.

"Let's pick up the pace," Graccus said from behind Martius.

The rider nodded his agreement. "We shouldn't wait around for the next attack."

The captain shouted more orders and men turned their shields to the side and resumed marching. Wounded legionaries were pulled toward the column center. New men stepped in the front ranks to replace them.

“Go check on the Second,” Graccus said once the column was moving again.

Martius nodded again. “Be back soon,” he said before pointing up the road. “The Fourth isn’t far.”

The rider didn’t want to abandon the main column, especially when taking Avorian’s strength with him. But there were other portions of the march to monitor. If the Third was successful in their advance but got too far in front of the rear talons, many legionnaires could be lost.

Martius fell back within his column. The soldiers marched double-time now and were already huffing under the weight of their armor and the growing heat of the morning. Martius tried to hold a grin and look confident as each man passed him. The expression was returned by many of the men.

Avorian dropped out of the sky just as Martius reached the rear. The great gryphon landed in the clear street and bounded to his rider and Martius flung himself up in the saddle as they returned to flight all in one motion. They were away long before the Gurians noticed a war gryphon alone in the open.

Avorian flapped over the city, taking them at speed back over their nighttime position and finding it deserted. Two talons from Graccus’s company had marched the other direction to aid the Second at the beginning of the day. Martius found them quickly and was glad to see that they weren’t under pressure like the main push north. Farther south, the men of Second Company weren’t so lucky.

The rear of the legion hadn’t been able to break out of their nighttime fortified position. They were still besieged. Gurians swarmed like ants angry from a disturbed nest. Avorian lowered his head and chose the direct approach, throwing himself into the enemy mass below. Martius let out a

war cry and Avorian added his own screech just before they made contact. The enemy didn't see the attack coming and their entire rear was rolled up on itself by Avorian's wings and talons.

The gryphon's claws touched down on the street and he swiped out with his front talons, both wings, and tail in all directions. Enemies fled or were knocked about. Martius yanked on the reins and directed Avorian to the left. There was still the danger of being overwhelmed by numbers if they stayed in one place too long. The gryphon reluctantly obeyed.

They barreled through more enemies and Avorian bounded off a building's wall and regained the sky. Howls of rage followed him.

Martius could see Gurians scurrying across rooftops, trying to flank the legionnaires trapped in their holdup barricade within the street. Another gryphon broke out of the fray and flew up on Avorian's flank. Martius locked eyes with Clavius on the back of Ptolemas and nodded in relief that his friend was still alive and fighting. The other air captain pointed to the west. Another mount made attacking passes on the rooftops to protect the trapped company's flank.

Martius signaled for Clavius to fly north and escort the reinforcement talons from the Third forward as fast as possible. Avorian would stay and fight here and they would break the Second out as quickly as they could.

Ptolemas dropped off their path, following orders. Martius held Avorian in the sky for a few more moments. He instructed the mount to send word to Volgus and ask for assistance. Gaius wouldn't like that the Second still held in its original location.

Avorian sent the message and then dived without waiting for further orders from his rider. Martius tilted back in the saddle and only barely grasped the pommel before they crashed into the street. The war beast

focused on the front barricade of the position and cleared a path for the legionnaires to begin pushing out and fighting back. Wherever Avorian's claws raked, Gurians fled.

He spun, wings flailing, and cleared a circle of the barbarians. More rushed him, but his claws swept each enemy aside in a cloud of blood. A final screech sent the rest into retreat.

But others poured along the opposite flank. Legionnaires from the Second, finally free, pushed out of their barricade to meet them and the fighting momentum flipped on its head. A shadow passed over the street to announce Ptolemas's return. The talons from the Third marched down the street and flung themselves against the enemies present.

The reinforcements were organized and soon broke away to face off with the various pockets of Gurians still fighting. Enemies flung themselves off rooftops onto the exposed heads of the arriving legionnaires. Avorian bounded off the ground and made a raking pass over both sides of the street to clear these attackers.

Martius kept Avorian in the air and they circled the Second's position as it bulged up the street. He tried to count the legionnaires remaining within the fortified position. The breakout was almost complete, but even with three gryphons present, there were too many enemies.

To add more worries, Martius caught sight of Marzio flying slowly on the western flank. He held one wing gingerly close to his side. He retreated to safe air, but only barely.

Avorian gave a caw of rage. They broke west to aid Marzio, pulling up alongside his low flight to shield him from the Gurians below. Martius signaled the rider to get his gryphon to safety, pointing and then holding his hands out wide. Avorian dived after the enemies the injured mount had just

engaged with. The Gurians fled as Avorian's shadow passed over them and there was no one left to attack on the rooftops. They'd made their mark and now pulled back.

The last of the legionnaires now pushed out of their barricade. Captain Argos was in the rear and waved his men onward with a sword. He raised a fist and saluted Avorian as the gryphon passed before ducking through the barrier himself. The Second was finally free.

But this only angered the Gurians further. New war horns sounded from the north and a swell of enemies poured into the street. The talons from the Third pivoted and led the rush forward with the Second close behind.

Clavius flew above infantry and Avorian swept up on the rear, flapping hard. The two sides clashed like thunder, swords and knives and shields banging against one another and men falling and adding more blood to run across the stones. Avorian swung around the fighting and dived for the enemy rear. Martius lowered his head as they barreled through the black mass. The street was narrower here and the space weakened their approach, but the impact still created plenty of carnage. Martius hacked his sword down at the passing enemies and Avorian swiped through the swarm all around him. Ptolemas hit nearby and created a similar ripple of destruction.

Something bit into Martius's leg and he swiped instinctively downward with his sword. There was a scream and Avorian bounded over the enemies in another direction. The rider looked down and saw blood poking through his riding trousers but paid no mind. He worried that Avorian was picking up wounds as well.

Gurians swarmed closer to Avorian's rear or his exposed flanks. Martius swung his sword everywhere, but the enemy's numbers were endless. For all the rider knew, they were fighting the entire city in this one location.

He reluctantly yanked Avorian's reins to send the gryphon back skyward. The talons had slowed their march again and were now bogged down in an unfortified area. They fought to gain a better position in the road, but were now even more exposed than they'd been previously.

Avorian sent a second call for Volgus's help as he circled the fray. Martius could see the Second's position shrinking, even with the help of the two gryphon still present. More and more Gurians tightened the noose around them as Avorian prepared for another dive.

Chapter 8

The Third linked with the Fourth and Gaius grew hopeful. But in seemingly the next moment, Volgus craned his neck to the south and passed along a message received from Second Company. Avorian requested aid. The men in the rear were in trouble.

There was no decision to make, no hesitation. Gaius let his war mount break from over the main column and the skirmishes in the streets. They couldn't leave Second Company out on its own.

With a glance to the west, Gaius estimated how much daylight he had left. The legion had made progress, but not enough. This day had flown along and disappeared in what seemed like a single flap of Volgus's wings.

In the south, two gryphons came into view, circling low over buildings. Next, the general spotted men fighting in a ball that took up the entire street, blocks from the towering pyramid. More Gurians rushed toward the fray, sensing exposed Belgadans.

Volgus announced his arrival to the other gryphons silently through their connection. Avorian startled, wobbling in his flight, but then swung wide before coming around and falling in with Volgus's path. Ptolemas kept engaged on the far side of the enveloped talons. Volgus dropped into an attacking path against the largest mass of enemies.

They smashed through the enemies, peppering the walls on the perimeter with bodies and limbs and blood. Volgus cleared a path down the middle of the Gurians and Avorian hit one of their flanks, buckling their

strength. The lead great gryphon kicked back into the air to dive across the other flank.

Gurians fled up the road and the tired legionnaires gave chase. Ptolemas lifted from the rear and the three gryphons flew slowly in a triangle formation over the infantry's resumed advance. Gaius looked to the other riders and held a fist up by his ear and then opened it and turned down a finger to point at each flank and the fleeing enemies. His two wingmen fell off and obeyed the direction to attack.

Volgus rose to a higher altitude and glided forward while scanning for more Gurians. Without the legion's war mounts, Gaius would've lost most of his force already. The Gurians were ferocious and numerous, furious at decades of Belgadan occupation. The Fifteenth, along with the garrison soldiers already massacred, had marched into the wrong place at the wrong time, at the exact boiling point of this society.

Volgus stiffened his neck, craning his head out to stare at a location. Gaius followed the direction. Gurians stood in ranks in the pyramid plaza. They formed in the open and hadn't seen Gaius's other gryphons. They were ready to attack when the Second rounded the next block.

Avorian and Ptolemas streaked in low over the buildings, appearing in a flash to hit these new enemies. Ptolemas struck first, rising quickly and dropping men dangling from his hind claws behind him. Avorian scattered the perimeter of the enemies by raking a wing through them. He tore apart nearly half the formation with a single run.

The Gurians broke and Volgus kept his vigil at altitude. Surviving enemies circled into the shadowy alleyways and side streets and used the buildings as cover. They would certainly be back to attack the company's advance. Gaius pulled Volgus around and dropped them low over the head

of the infantry column. He found Captain Argos among the crowd and held an open hand out pointing north along the street.

The Second was to keep advancing. The road was clear.

Gaius then pointed two fingers at his own eyes and then angled his other open hand to the east before shifting it to a balled fist. Argos needed to watch his eastern flank and to hold tight to his formation.

The legionnaires huffed passed the pyramid, heads down and armor clanging as they marched along. Gurians broke on the flanks and assaulted the company like snares set along forest trails for game. The Second kept its advancing pace but was soon bogged down on the flanks.

From Gaius's height, the infantryman column looked ragged. It was broken in some places, lagging behind in others. The men continued, however, moving as fast as their legs and the enemy attacks allowed.

Gaius could see more Gurians massing in the side streets and scampering across rooftops. They were a swarm pouring over the buildings, waiting their turn to drop onto the company and dismantle it.

Ptolemas and Avorian climbed to Volgus's height and Gaius waved them away with a flash of his hand. The allies fell away, positioning themselves back on the legion's flank. Volgus flew in the other direction with Gaius suddenly changing tactics.

He left the main street and targeted a wide thoroughfare snaking up its eastern flank. A Gurian group jogged here, heading north and not spotting the shadow of the gryphon's approach until it was too late. Volgus picked two of the enemy up with his hind claws and threw them across the group. His front talons sent gore spraying across the street. He scattered the entire group in a matter of moments and then bounded up the street after another contingent of the barbarians.

All Gurians fled. Volgus focused his attacks on the left side of the street, pushing the enemies east and away from the Second's march. The great gryphon flapped above the buildings and arced around, looking for another opportunity to strike. The war beast repeated the process of dive, attack, and destroy across multiple stretches of this quarter. By the time Gaius pulled Volgus back to an observation height, the Second was past the pyramid. They finally marched along the last stretch of street to where Third Company had camped the night before.

The force was behind schedule, but had pushed through a difficult fight. They'd survived.

As Volgus circled, Avorian flew forward and scouted ahead before returning at speed. Martius signaled and Gaius nodded his reception.

Blockage ahead.

Gaius could guess the enemy's plan. He nudged Volgus north and let Martius and Avorian hold over the Second's advance. Their height gave Gaius a good view of what had been a legionary position the previous evening. The Gurians had taken over and rebuilt the barricades to block the street.

Resisting the urge to send Volgus down on the position to wreak havoc alone, Gaius pulled back and sent his mount down to land in front of the advancing infantry. The column engulfed Volgus and the men gave tired and hopeful cheers to the war mount as they pushed onward up the street. Captain Argos stopped to greet the general.

"Barricades up ahead. The Third didn't have enough men to hold their old position." Gaius looked north as he spoke. The captain stood below him and removed his helmet to wipe sweat from his brow.

“They want us off the main street,” Argos said. Gaius always wondered how his hair remained pristine under his helm, even in the thick of battle. It waved peacefully in the slow-moving wind.

“We won’t do that.” The general grinned.

Volgus ruffled his feathers and tilted his head to the sky, eager to get back to fighting. Gaius patted the war beast’s neck and then looked down on the Second’s commander.

“Get your men ready, the first barricade’s just up ahead.” Gaius twisted in the saddle as Volgus prepared to launch. The general surveyed the van of the company’s march one last time. “Rush straight in. Let’s break it quickly.”

Volgus was in the air before Argos could respond. As with all Gaius’s soldiers, the officer would understand the orders and know the urgency of the situation.

The general threw a hand motion at Air Captain Martius above the western flank of the company. He included an order to call in more gryphons to their rear position. Clavius and Ptolemas floated in the east and Gaius flicked orders their way as well.

The infantry column picked up pace below, like a boulder rolling down a slope. Their shields swung and their armor clamored among itself. The rumble grew as their target appeared. The Belgadans surged up the street like a giant metallic serpent preparing to strike a solid wall.

Gaius had to give the Gurians credit. They had multiple strategies and were patient and organized enough to try each one in turn. For all their fervor and crazed fighting style, they’d thought through this ambush well.

It wouldn’t make a difference. The legion would smash the enemies hiding behind this latest blockage.

Volgus dropped from his height, but not to fall on the enemies behind the barricade. He landed just behind the Second's advance and deposited the general back on the ground. Gaius drew his sword from his scabbard and sent Volgus back into the sky. A great gryphon wouldn't sit still in the rear of a battle such as this.

Gaius joined in the war cries from his men. The infantry was to rush the barricade and attempt to overwhelm the position. Gryphons would protect the flanks and eliminate any masses of troops moving up in the east and west. Gaius wanted the infantry to clear the fortified position before risking a gryphon diving into the fray.

But the general wouldn't order his men against the barricades while sitting safely in a saddle above. He would fight from the front.

He pressed up to the backs of the soldiers waiting to rush the barrier. Red plumes dotted the top of the barricade already and the forward fighters clashed with the dark tunics of the Gurian side. Captain Argos stood at the barrier's base, sending in the second wave as sappers began dismantling the pile of wood and rocks.

Legionnaires made way after spotting Gaius's approach.

"Infinites bless you, sir!"

"Victory!"

"For the empress!"

More yells arose and joined with the war cries and screams from atop the barricade. Gaius waved at the men who called out and showed them his sword or a clenched fist to signify their strength.

Avorian's wings flickered over the rooftops and screams arrived a moment later from where he'd disappeared. The infantry lunged farther

forward. Gurians ripped out of an alleyway and hit the main attack in the flank, pulling Gaius's attention away from the advance.

"Shields!" His voice carried easily over the fray.

The rear soldiers moved to follow his orders but not fast enough.

The Gurians slashed out a swath. They swung long swords and carved a hole until their blades struck Belgadan metal. Gaius's shield wall closed and the bulge that had forced itself into the street was cut off on three sides. The enemy had made a mistake attacking here.

"Release!"

Shields broke apart in a clatter and the snare snapped closed around the Gurians. Blades bit into the enemies. Some Gurians parried and fell back into their alley, but a majority were cut down savagely. Legionnaires gave chase to the survivors.

Gaius stepped after them as well and hacked an enemy who spun after an initial shove from another Belgadan. The Gurian crumpled and Gaius stepped over him and pointed the line into position. The men closed up their ranks and absorbed the soldiers who'd overextended after the enemy.

As Gaius turned from the flank, an enemy leaped from the ground. The clever Gurian had been playing dead, but Belgadan reflexes were stronger for the ploy. Gaius brought his sword down, knocking away the attack and jabbing the enemy in the face with his other fist. The man staggered, recovered a moment later, and then swung his sword at Gaius's exposed side.

The general's blade was a blur, his reactions honed through decades of fighting. Metal clanged together. Gaius punched out again. This time the enemy jumped backward and stumbled on the fallen body of a fellow Gurian. Gaius pressed his advantage. The enemy's sword flashed low at

Gaius's legs in desperation. The general parried down and away, pivoting his wrist to position his shorter blade for each block.

Once. Twice. A third time. He then countered with a flick and the duel was done.

The Gurian crumbled from a slash across his chest and throat. Gaius grimaced and caught his breath, barely watching the man fall. Then he stepped back through the flank and rejoined the center of the company's column. There were pockets of fighting down the line as Gurians attempted to encircle the Belgadans while still holding the barricade, which was now awash with legionnaires. Gaius spotted Argos on top of the mound, waving for more of his men.

A smile crept up the general's face as he advanced. The men were making good progress if they'd already taken the barricade. Perhaps this position wouldn't be as difficult as he—

An arrow struck the middle of Argos's chest. The captain stayed upright, blinking against the shock. A nearby legionnaire reached but wasn't quick enough and Argos's body tumbled out of sight off the barrier.

Gaius's mouth hung open. There was a contingent of enemy bowmen on the right flank shooting down to the rooftops. The western sun illuminated them with a golden glow as they pulled back their strings and sighted their missiles.

Gaius blinked and passed an order to Volgus. Immediately, wind howled as the snap of wings and a screech of rage whistled overhead. Some of the Belgadans around Gaius ducked at the booming noise. By the time they looked up, the bowmen on the roof were decimated.

“Forward!”

There was no other order for Gaius to give to the infantry now.

Across the company, the soldiers either hadn't seen Captain Argos fall or were veteran enough to block out the trauma and follow orders. The men charged and climbed the barricade or pushed through the narrow openings created by the sappers. The Gurians on the flank retreated under threat from the war gryphons.

Gaius looked at the sky but couldn't spot Volgus. He reached out for him and found the war beast circling the enemy position and tracking a contingent of Gurians on the eastern flank. The general nodded, content with all positions, then lowered his head and ducked through the barrier with the line of legionnaires.

On the far side, he didn't find Captain Argos. The men had already pulled the officer away and would be treating him. Gaius took command in his stead.

The legionnaires had already secured the space. Bodies and debris were strewn about the cobblestone streets. Gaius kicked through the ash of an old fire and pointed men out to a perimeter.

An arrow whacked into a shield nearby just before a screeching Avorian swept along the bordering rooftops. Another war mount made a mirroring pass on the opposite side.

The barricades that had guarded the alleyways the previous night were gone. Multiple shields took their place as the legionnaires filed into positions and howls and horns echoed within the maze of streets.

The main road bent here, angling to the east slightly. Around the bend awaited another barrier. Gaius was about to push around the corner when a sling stone struck the legionnaire in front of him. More of the projectiles peppered the walls on his left. The general ducked behind the shields of his men.

There was a crash and a scream and the clattering of stones ceased. Gaius poked his head up and saw the shadow of a gryphon lifting off from an attacking pass.

“Advance!”

“Take the barrier!”

“Push them now!”

Orders came from all about Gaius. His soldiers understood the company’s goal and the direness of the situation. The general had very little to command. He rushed forward with the tide of his soldiers and lowered his head and ran behind a platoon of shields to the next barrier. There were more enemies on top of this barricade. More slingstone volleys would be coming. They needed another gryphon run.

“Shields! Stay down!” Gaius yelled between heaving breaths as he ran. “Keep moving!”

But no projectiles struck the Belgadan shield wall.

He placed a hand over his eyes to block the sun. He refocused on the warriors atop the barrier. They were larger than the other Gurians, tall and with something sparkling on their clothing. With another blink, the scene solidified. These men were allies.

As the general realized his group was safe, a flight of gryphons flashed overhead. There were more than three in the sky now and the howls from the Gurians receded. Gaius, at last, let his feet stop and his back straighten and his lungs fill with a deep intake of air. Volgus landed behind him and the rider gave his trusty mount a hug.

“Good work,” the general said when he stepped back. The great gryphon made a low humming noise in reply. Gaius then raised his voice

and addressed the men around them. “Link up with the reinforcements. The advance continues.”

The men shuffled away and the rear swept up to Volgus’s position as Gaius mounted the war beast. They kicked into the air and watched as the soldiers continued north with the streets relatively clear of Gurians at last and the Second linked with the rest of the trapped legion.

* * *

The night’s cold closed around the legion. Gaius’s breath formed before his face in the dead desert air as he exited the camp’s makeshift infirmary. He’d just seen to Captain Argos, who still clung to life after his arrow wound.

But the veteran officer wouldn’t survive the night. The arrow was too deep and the healers had attempted to remove the barbed tip to avoid infection and only made the bleeding worse.

Argos was a capable warrior, a good soldier, and a good Belgadan.

Another loss. Another death.

Gaius and Volgus and the air cavalry had escorted the depleted talons from Second Company, strengthened by the reinforcements from the Fourth, all the way across the city to the fortified position where the Fourth and the Third hunkered down for the night. This was nearly half of Gaius’s legion in one place and he still felt trapped. The remaining path to the gate was short, but the Gurians would make it treacherous.

The camp was neither silent nor loud. All the men were tired, resting. There were others in pain and fighting to recover from wounds. The

infirmary was full of screams and moans. The uninjured were quiet as a grave.

There were constant howls or random horns throughout the city. The Gurians didn't want the Belgadans to forget the further fighting coming in the morning. It would be another day of trials and traps.

Before dusk had descended, Gaius had flown Volgus on a reconnaissance mission. The city was awash with fire and the movement of gathering torches. The Gurians would come out in force the next morning and now had a compressed target to focus on. Gaius would need to use brute force to get his men through.

He walked toward a circle of officers but slowed his steps to allow his mind more time to roam. His thoughts drifted from the city and his soldiers for the first time since the massacred garrison had been found.

The legion had not marched south to pacify Gura. This ambush was outside of their mission. Generals Zagros and the new rebels were still out there somewhere in the southern reaches.

Gaius pulsed his jaw muscles by clenching his teeth and then shook his head. He rubbed one cheek and felt the growing stubble over a tight and fatigued tension.

Survival.

That was the only goal for now.

The general reached the officer circle and stepped into the glow of their small fire. He took a seat next to Air Captain Martius and looked over the group. Clavius was here as well; his and Martius's mounts were out on flying watch. Captains Harmodius and Graccus were also present and there was a gaping space where Argos would've sat with a smile ready for the general's orders.

Gaius looked at Martius first.

“We need to start risking the gryphons more.”

The young captain nodded, as did Clavius.

“How is Marzio?” the general asked.

“Recovering. He’s able to fly,” Martius said. “He won’t be of much use to us tomorrow.”

Gaius grimaced but tried not to let it show. He’d heard about the gryphon’s injury fighting with the Second and had sent Epicas and the mount to the gate where there was more room to attend to a war beast. The general chose to push the conversation forward rather than dwell on another casualty.

“There will be another scrum tomorrow,” Gaius continued, looking at the eyes focused back on him. “They’ll be waiting for us on the other side of our barricade. They’ll clog the streets between us and the gate.”

“The Sixth should break from the gate and meet us halfway.” Harmodius’s voice was low over the crackling fire. “That worked well for my men today to save Argos’s talons.”

Gaius shook his head. “We can’t weaken the garrison around the gate. They could help us, yes. But if the gate falls, we’re trapped.”

Harmodius didn’t argue. His shoulders were slumped in fatigue. No one else spoke for a moment, until Martius cleared his throat.

“We talked with the sappers from Graccus’s group.” The boy’s words started small but grew in strength by the end of the statement. “They think there’s another way through the city.”

“Tunnels?” Gaius glanced at the circle with a raised eyebrow. That was the only thing he could think of the sappers could offer in this kind of fighting.

As if in response, two engineers, both short in stature but with broad shoulders, marched by carrying a solid-looking ladder. Gaius eyed the dark roofs above their heads.

He understood now.

He was impressed with the young air captain.

“The Gurians will be waiting for us in the street. They’ll have their normal flanks set up and they know the city better than we ever could,” Martius said.

“But we control the sky, and that includes the rooftops,” Gaius finished the thought. He nodded, strangely confident. “Let’s go for it.”

Chapter 9

War gryphons executed their first passes over the rooftops while darkness still gripped the city. The Gurians lying in wait on the tops of the buildings were thrown from their perches by wings and talons and screeching beaks. A pathway was soon clear.

The sun broke the horizon. Martius circled on Avorian, scanning for more movement and found none. Back in the barricaded camp, the sappers hefted their ladders. The legion made its move.

The company didn't break apart their northern barrier and rush up the street to fight their way through the clogged roadway. They would try a new tactic, a trick of Belgadan ingenuity.

Martius's leg throbbed from the cut he'd received during the fighting yesterday. He gripped the saddle tighter and pushed beyond the pain, focusing on the trial before the legion.

Flickers appeared on a rooftop to the north. Avorian dived before Martius could even twitch the reins. A gryphon's eyes were far better than his rider's and he flew straight for the Gurians clambering up onto a stretch of roof. With a screech, the war beast swiped away two of them and pummeled his wings through the others, sending all tumbling to the street below.

A sling stone whistled near Martius's head, but his gryphon was far too quick of a target. Avorian banked hard and stayed low. They kept their speed and skimmed over the buildings, but no further Gurians appeared.

The great gryphon rose, and Martius spied Volgus making a similar pass on the other side of the street. The eastern and western flanks were open. Gurians crowded in the street, knives and swords ready. But there was no one for them to fight.

Martius pulled Avorian back over the camp position. The legionnaires climbed the ladders and slunk across the rooftops. Martius thought of Atras with First Company in the north and knew the silent sapper would be proud of the work of these engineers. Planks formed bridges over the narrow openings between the buildings and created a new path heading north. Once the last soldiers climbed across a plank, it would be carried forward to be used up the line.

Three companies' worth of soldiers was a large contingent and the going was slow even without any enemies to contend with yet. The Gurians would only stay in the dark so long.

Horns blared. Avorian swung them around to find Gurians rushing the barricade of the former camp. The locals didn't have patience, not after multiple days and nights of fighting and with their enemy seemingly trapped. The locals flung themselves over the barricade and fell down into the camp.

Clavius and Ptolemas pulled up beside Martius in the air just as the lead air captain got an idea. He flicked a hand motion to his wingman and then yanked on Avorian's reins. The two gryphons dived, keeping tight together with only a thin strip of wind howling between wing tips.

The Gurians were exposed and trapped against the inside wall of the barricade now. Their impatience had betrayed them. As they stared around the deserted camp, the gryphons pounced.

Avorian made a low pass that scraped his talons along the street stones and then through a contingent of the confused enemies. Clavius's Ptolemas crossed the other way, breaking wide then hitting the other half of the barbarian group. Screams and howls echoed behind them as the gryphons returned to altitude.

Martius scanned over the surviving enemies. They would be quick to piece together the Belgadan ruse.

The howls began to build again, the noise rising until the streets echoed with rage directed skyward. The Gurians retreated north, mirroring the movements of the legionnaires above them. Clavius and Ptolemas clung tight to Avorian's air wake. The words of General Gaius from the previous evening came back to Martius's minds.

We need to start risking the gryphons more.

Volgus curved in from the north over the front of the Gurian advance. Avorian and Ptolemas rushed up on the enemy rear and Ponderas and Tarchus joined the fray from the east and west, respectively. The pincer movement clamped together in a rush of wings.

Clavius broke off from his tight hold to Martius's flank. Ptolemas sped up and struck the last ranks of the enemy mass. The Gurians only had time to startle before being impaled on talons and knocked aside by strong wings.

Avorian used a higher angle and swept through the barbarian mass. He pulled up and to the right to avoid Ponderas's own strike and then snaked back to knock through more of the seething mass. He met Volgus over the column and the two great gryphons went to work smashing and slashing and bludgeoning the helpless locals.

Martius's mount landed among the throng and kicked out his hind legs. The war beast then spun, lashing out with a front talon and shoving further enemies to the side with a stiff wing. His tail snapped at any remaining locals like a whip.

A screech sounded to break Avorian's war fury. The gryphon kicked off the ground and turned south. Ponderas and Anshas fluttered up above the fray briefly before dropping again, one of the gryphon's wings fluttering erratically. Avorian snapped his wings to send them after the wounded mount.

The Gurians swarmed, now recovered from their initial shock at the sudden appearance of the gryphons. They sensed an opening for blood after hearing the gryphon's distressed screech and pressed in tight to hold the war beast on the ground. Ponderas spun about and smashed men away, but she could only hold the tide for so long with one good wing.

Avorian rammed into the flank of the Gurian swarm. His wounded ally spun and tried to bound into the opening created. Avorian leaped over the lesser mount and smashed apart more of the attackers.

Ponderas launched but again had trouble gaining altitude. She tried to stretch for the lip of the closest building. Avorian gave a shove from underneath to push the gryphon up and over to the safety of the rooftop. But the saving motion sent Avorian back down to street level. The Gurians reversed course, closing swiftly on their position like a rogue wave.

Avorian slipped on the slick stones. His legs buckled and his breastplate crunched against the street. Martius was nearly thrown off sideways, but he held on with an iron grip. Righting himself in the saddle, the rider found Gurians crashing in on them from all sides.

Avorian swiped out in order to clear space. He bounded through the crowd to the middle of the street, lowering his head like a battering ram. Gurian knives flashed and Martius hacked where he could, but he could only protect one side of Avorian at a time. A sword thrust in from behind and streaked Avorian's feathers with blood. The great gryphon made no sound in reaction. He kicked the swordsmen hard and continued knocking the others about with fury.

A gap formed and Avorian launched. Gurian howls chased them, but the locals had lost their opportunity. Avorian flew normally, powering them to observation altitude. When Martius sensed through their bond for any injuries, the gryphon shoved him aside and pointedly looked down over the battle below.

Martius took a breath and then set about checking on the other gryphons in his air corps. Volgus and General Gaius rose to their level and Martius looked down to where the general had launched from. There were piles of black-clad bodies lining the street.

Aristas and Tarchus had seen similar success on the right flank. The Gurians retreated in all directions. All the while, the legionnaires on the roof advanced. Ponderas flapped up off her own building, finally finding the stability to remain airborne.

Gaius pulled Volgus around and barreled north. Martius signaled for his other riders to follow and they fell in behind the general in a V formation. They dropped low, searching for more enemies.

The road was clear, but the rooftops were filling once more as the enemy adjusted to the Belgadan advance. Martius sent Ptolemas and Tarchus out with a quick hand motion and then held Avorian tight to Volgus's tail. The two great gryphons barreled onward and at last the border

of the city came into view. The river glimmered heading north, the sands flat on its shoreline. That desert meant freedom, but more Gurians converged on the legionnaires holding the main gate.

The rest of the air corps fought in support here, rising and diving above the fray. Infantry companies defended below them, but only barely.

Not much farther, Martius thought to himself. *Just hold a bit longer.*

Gaius held a hand behind his back and clenched his fist. *Hold position*, the signal said.

Volgus then sped away toward the gate fighting. Martius yanked Avorian around and dived to the rooftops to assist Ptolemas and Tarchus and the companies pushing for the city's exit.

This section of the city consisted of larger buildings, wide structures with flat roofs and multiple entranceways in the corners. Gurians appeared on all of them and threw chaos among the legion's advance. Instead of focusing on the march and moving the crossing planks forward and hauling the ladders, the legion formed defensive perimeters facing the doorways and shoved against the growing rush of barbarians.

The gryphons dived. They cleared each section of roof to give the infantry more space, but by the time they pulled up to observation height, the Gurians were already swarming again. There were too many of the enemy.

Time to get back to the street, Martius thought to himself.

Avorian cawed in agreement. The sky was his realm. Infantry were meant for the ground.

The great gryphon slowed and drifted lower over the rooftops on the western flank. Martius leaned to one side and spied Harmodius near the

front ranks of his men. They exchanged hand signals and the captain nodded and pointed down to the street.

Avorian dropped to hover over the indicated space. He shifted his head east to west and back again, watching the proceedings. Ptolemas and Tarchus dived on either side and broke up Gurians advancing on the legion's rooftop positions. Sappers carried ladders on their shoulders and dropped them over the sides of the buildings and the Gurians burst out of alleyways and rushed to where the ladders landed.

Avorian fell off his hover. He claws clacked against the stones of the street and he reared up tall before the mass. The Gurians at the front skidded and tried to stop but tumbled directly into his outstretched wings. The gryphon screeched and kicked up on his hind legs before falling forward and tearing into the full crowd.

More enemies came from all sides. The first infantrymen to hit the street were engulfed by a crush that Avorian couldn't stop. Further legionnaires reinforced the position and a bulge formed as the talons fought outward for space. The soldiers didn't have time or room to heft their shields, but their swords lashed out and spread the street with blood. There were screams and orders yelled and ladders toppled and hefted into place again. Avorian screeched over all the chaos and pummeled through more of the flanking Gurians.

Out the other side they found space and Avorian landed. Martius held the reins up and back and kept them in position. He took a breath, thinking.

After only a moment, he nodded and released the reins. Avorian dropped a shoulder and Martius swung off. His boots splashed into a puddle of blood. He drew his sword and advanced toward the fighting without protest from his mount.

Avorian lifted off but didn't rise high. He barreled down the street just below roof level and then raked a wing through the western side of the Gurians. Martius ran to the eastern ladders and impaled an enemy against the wall with his sword. He pulled the blade out and spun to parry an attack from another Gurian and then chopped through that barbarian as well.

His leg had ceased throbbing. Adrenaline and focus erased all pain and soreness. He spun and hacked and pressed through the fray to reach the infantry.

There were more Belgadans in the street and a shield wall began to form on either flank with more men climbing down the ladders by the moment. Martius spun his sword once and then gripped the hilt firmly. He pointed men into place and called for the wall to advance.

A shadow engulfed the street. A rush of air followed that nearly knocked Martius to the ground. Volgus and Gaius returned to the fight like a thunderclap and scattered the remaining Gurians. The shield wall expanded and the talons took full control of the street.

Avorian landed, twirling down vertically with great flaps of his wings. Martius leaped into the saddle. He found the eyes of Harmodius and the captain nodded his thanks before the great gryphon took flight again. There was only the final run to the gate remaining.

Avorian flew north at a glide and Volgus pulled up behind them to hang from their right flank. Ptolemas flew in on the opposite side and Tarchus pushed farther afield to relay an update to the soldiers and gryphons at the gate. Martius turned in the saddle and met Gaius's eyes. The general held up a fist for them to hold course.

The gate and outer wall reappeared and the trio of gryphons banked to monitor the van of the advancing Second, Third, and Fourth. There were

talons pushing out from the gate already. The Gurians there were disorganized and fleeing in many places. Justus and Ponderas joined the thrust out and flew parallel to Martius's group in support. The city rooftops were clear and many of the side streets were deserted or piled with bodies.

Almost there, Martius said within his gryphon bond.

Avorian bobbed his head, his mouth open and happy. He still focused on scanning the city and watching for any more tricks from the Gurians. There could be a last surprise flank coming. The enemy might only be acting as if they were finished.

Volgus and Ptolemas broke off to either side and the gryphons monitored separate portions of the infantry's advance. Avorian dived three more times and tore apart pockets of Gurians that appeared and sent them screaming into retreat through the alleyways. The main road remained clear and the talons from the gate linked up with Harmodius's command and they ran for the gate.

The legionnaires marched double-time. They were hampered by their heavy armor and the fatigue of a long few days of fighting. But they pressed on and the specter of safety loomed ahead to provide all the motivation needed. The legion reunited and Martius pulled Avorian higher and attempted to count the gryphons of his air corps.

They circled wide, unable to confirm numbers with all the movement, but pleased to catch a glimpse of the last legionnaires in the rear of Third Company jogging into the fortified square just inside the city's main entrance. Volgus dropped into a landing for Gaius to order the gates open and the legion's exit.

Hope swelled within Martius's chest and pushed out his weariness from the fighting and limited sleep. Avorian joined his feelings and the great

gryphon swept them out to the full air corps and steeled everyone for the final holding defense of the escape.

A flicker in the sky caught Martius's eye, turning his head. He assumed it was Ptolemas or another air captain pulling up into formation as Avorian's wingman. But the beast moved quick, wings cupped, talons outstretched. Avorian rolled into a dive.

A screech echoed behind them and Martius plunged low in the saddle. They rocketed over the city walls and out over the stretch of sandy riverbank heading north. There was a dust cloud in the distance.

Another army.

Black smog hung in the sky on the horizon. It was too large of a force to be Basilas and First Company. Avorian banked to the right, their pursuer tight on their tail. But Avorian deftly swung back hard left and sent the new gryphon off course.

Martius craned his neck and caught a good view of his chaser. The rider's features were full of shadow, long black hair streaming behind a dark helm. His gryphon was a hulking figure, larger than Avorian, with a scar running through one eye.

Terrible visions of the nighttime fighting over Carnassus and the theft of gryphons flooded back to Martius. He'd forgotten about their true enemy in the south during the struggle within Gura. The legion had been distracted with its own survival. But now Zagros's legion had finally made its appearance.

The traitor Goras pulled his mount, the great gryphon Hoplas, into a hover and sneered at Martius. The expression bore into Martius and he sensed its meaning perfectly even with the great distance between them. They would meet soon for a duel. Battle would be had. Goras meant to

destroy Martius's air cavalry and General Zagros would decimate Gaius and the Fifteenth Legion.

Martius shook his head, closing his eyes against the enemy's gaze. His hope turned to dread and their victory evaporated. He tried to glare back at Goras, but the expression fell flat, weak.

The rider snapped Avorian's reins and the great gryphon threw a screech at Hoplas and then turned his back. They needed to get back to the legion and warn Gaius and the rest of the air cavalry. The Fifteenth escaped the city, but they marched into another trap, this one with far sharper teeth.

Chapter 10

Gaius thanked the Infinities there wouldn't be another fight this day. The dust cloud of the rebel army drew closer at a slow pace and only grew slower. They were marching into their camp for the day on the horizon.

If Zagros wanted to rush forward and attack while the Fifteenth was tired, the loyalists wouldn't survive. The legionnaires were run-down and exhausted, still sweating in the desert heat even though they'd removed their armor and sprawled out to rest. The only portion of the army that still had any energy were the war mounts.

Volgus circled with the air cavalry above Gaius. The beasts formed a phalanx of defense against Zagros's opposite contingent. Gaius had spied Goras and Hoplas leading the enemy flights, but any attempts to attack the Fifteenth were pushed off by the loyalist mounts.

Behind the general, Gura still seethed. The gates were now barred against his army. Gaius had half a mind to attack the city again and use the safety of its walls as defense against Zagros. But either outside or inside, they would be stuck between two enemies. And Gaius knew he didn't have men to spare assaulting a position they'd just abandoned.

"Build the wall here, stretching around to the east," the general said. His shoulders were stiff with pain as he reached out and traced the circumference of their new camp. Luckily, the sappers aligned to the Sixth and Seventh were relatively fresh, having spent most of the battle stationed

on the gatehouse. They would build a perimeter through the evening while the legion recovered.

Gaius didn't order any special defenses, just the standard legionary wall and an organized camp for his men. Volgus let out a screech above and Gaius saw him spinning in a vertical dive with a rebel gryphon. The enemy mounts kept breaking off and fleeing, seeking to pull the loyalists out of position. Goras toyed with his trapped prey.

Long ago, Gaius had seen Oxus, Emperor Titus's former mount, playing with a mouse he'd caught on the palace terrace. The Night Gryphon would let the rodent go and allow it to scurry in one direction before slamming his talons in the way and raking the poor animal back into his clutches.

This scene flashed before Gaius's eyes and offered him a minor escape from the sand and the heat of his current predicament. He related more to the mouse than the mighty gryphon.

His legion was supposed to be defending the empire from foreign, evil foes. Instead, they were stuck between two rebellions. The army was a bloodied fish being circled by sharks.

The general returned to observing the dust cloud. They weren't hurrying. Gaius's sappers were already pushing outward and staking out the wall and shoveling a ditch for the outer circumference. Carts were hauled forward, full of supplies, and the hammering and sawing commenced in earnest.

Why would General Zagros take his time with the approach?

Was he toying with his prey?

This was the truth of things, Gaius knew. He blinked slowly and then settled on that reasoning. General Zagros knew he had the upper hand and that the Fifteenth couldn't go anywhere. One night of rest wouldn't pull

Gaius's men back to their full strength. Zagros could keep his men fresh and complete the encirclement tomorrow, all the while making the Fifteenth dwell on their coming fate, like a mouse in a gryphon's talons.

The general ground his teeth together and walked back through his men. He swallowed and released the tension in his jaw, putting on the bravest face he could manage. The men needed strength from their leader.

To the east was desert. The legion couldn't run there. In the west they could cross the river but would be on the wrong side of the waterway and allow Zagros a path north into the central empire.

The general looked across the northern plain through the enemy that blocked him and beyond to the horizon. He reached out with his mind, foolishly attempting to warn Basilas of their predicament. Above him, Volgus sought to send out a warning through his connections with the gryphons stationed with First Company, but the distance was too great.

It was easy for Gaius to communicate with his great gryphon above him. But that only increased the frustration that he couldn't converse with his friend mere leagues downriver. They needed Basilas and First Company to help break apart Zagros's vise. They needed the prima captain to rush to their aid.

Volgus tried again, pushing harder through his air corps connection. But he met the same issues and caved in frustration. The legion would be on its own unless Gaius could get one of his riders through and on a flight to Basilas to call for help.

Goras and Zagros would know Gaius needed this as well. They would be expecting the gryphons to try and slip through and the formation of enemy war beasts dotting the sky would align against them.

That was Goras's current goal, Gaius realized. Zagros wasn't going to attack. He was going to hold them in position. The rebel gryphons could hold the Fifteenth air cavalry at bay and keep Basilas in the north. They outnumbered Martius's air corps and had more great gryphons at their disposal. Gaius and Martius would have to force their way through and that meant risking his mounts and riders.

Standard Belgadan military doctrine stated to protect the war beasts at all costs. But he couldn't push out with his infantrymen either. They were down after fighting through the Gurians, not to mention outnumbered by at least a company's worth of men. Zagros had played his hand well.

The rebel was patient and ruthless.

Gaius pulled Volgus back to the general's position with a command through their bond. The great gryphon obeyed, but kept his eye on the horizon and monitored the enemy's movement. The legion's other gryphons circled on their patrols or flew in to land and recover within the growing camp. Martius had the air captains overlapping on watches but would give his men as much of a break as possible. Gaius would do the same with the infantry.

The general glanced up at the silhouette of his gryphon flapping against the sun. He twisted his mouth to the side and sucked on the inside of his cheek. No magical answers came to him.

Gaius forced himself into movement at last. He marched to help his men build the fortified wall. Next would be overseeing the construction of living quarters and then visiting the healers and the soldiers who'd been injured pushing out of the city. He also needed to take stock of his companies and reorganize the ranks to be ready if the rebels attacked in the morning.

There was much to do, but the general didn't make it far. He barely completed a step before a whistle sounded and drew his attention back to the north. A single horseman approached.

The rider wore too many clothes for the desert. His cloak flickered in the sunlight, marking him as neither Gurian nor Belgadan. The coat was gray instead of the normal brown or black of the locals. A legionnaire ran back from the Fifteenth's pickets and made straight for the general as Gaius watched the rider.

"Messenger approaching, sir. He's from the rebel side."

Gaius stared, still sucking on his cheek. "Is he Sarissa?"

The soldier threw a glance back north as if he could confirm from this distance. "Looked like it, sir."

Generals Zagros and his legions had been fighting the Sarissa before they rebelled. Why was he using one of their horsemen as a messenger?

"He wants to parlay," the vanguard scout said, quite unnecessarily.

Gaius nodded and reversed his path back to the north. He pointed back to the soldier while locking eyes with the scout. "Bring my horse forward."

"Yes, sir."

"And send for Captain Argo—"

Gaius caught his words before fully finishing the name. He cleared his throat and only faltered one step. Argos hadn't made it through the night after his injuries.

"Send for Captain Harmodius."

"Immediately, sir."

Gaius stopped his march as he reached the rear of his pickets. The Sarissa rider continued his steady trot across the desert sand. Behind him,

the enemy gryphons flickered across the bright sky and moved in and out of the hazy dust cloud kicked up by Zagros's vast number of soldiers.

Avorian appeared overhead, flying slowly with wings outstretched and tilting his body side to side to keep their slow pace and altitude against the rising heat of the desert. Gaius held a fist up to Martius and pointed to the rider approaching. The lead air captain nodded and Avorian held his path.

Captain Harmodius galloped up from the rear with Gaius's horse. He held his grimace in place as he stared at the approaching messenger.

"Sarissa?" he asked.

"Looks like it from that cloak."

The rider was close enough now that Gaius could confirm the green and gray shades spread across the garment. He seemed to be wearing a patchwork quilt sewn together haphazardly, but Gaius knew from experience the cloak would be perfect camouflage in the mountain forests of the Sarissa region.

"He's a tribesman all right," Gaius said.

Harmodius gave a grunt. "Let's go talk to him."

The captain's shoulders were low and his voice tired. But there was a task set before them. Belgadans didn't shy away from a full day's work, no matter how terrible the previous days had been.

Gaius hoisted himself up on his horse's back. The general wanted to turn and go back into camp and ignore this messenger. He wanted to rest his eyes and lie down on something, even the hot sand if he could find some shade. But this war was only just beginning. Gaius needed to lead.

The distance between the two parties closed quickly. The Sarissa reined up and let the Belgadans trot the final stretch to him. Gaius noticed immediately that the Sarissa kept his hands visible and well away from the

folds of his cloak. Underneath would be the curved blades made famous by his tribes. Even messengers were always armed.

“You seem to be with the wrong army,” Gaius said. He didn’t want the other side dictating the terms of the conversation.

“You seem to be trapped.”

Gaius’s control of the proceedings evaporated before it fully formed.

“My general wishes to parlay,” the Sarissa continued. “He’ll come to this position, given your predicament. Is that amenable to you?”

The man spoke perfect Belgadan. Without his cloak, Gaius wouldn’t have picked up on his accent. This was someone who’d been with Zagros a long time.

“Then we’ll parlay,” Gaius said. “Gryphons?”

The Sarissa nodded. “Yes, he will fly forward immediately. Two war beasts in support, that is all.”

The messenger pulled his horse around and trotted away and didn’t give Gaius a chance to respond. The general glanced at Harmodius, but the captain only offered a shrug. “This war makes no sense,” he said with a sigh.

“None at all,” Harmodius agreed.

* * *

Volgus clicked his beak twice with impatience. The great gryphon had flown forward to Gaius on his own after the messenger left. Harmodius took their horses back to the legion’s main position. Air Captains Martius

and Clavius and their own war beasts landed shortly after and the group waited for the appearance of the rebel general for parlay.

Zagros was late.

Three specks formed out of the dust cloud of the horizon and made for Gaius. Volgus clicked again and tilted his head as his gryphon eyes watched the approach.

“To the sky,” Gaius said over his shoulder.

Martius and Clavius had remained mounted and now snapped their gryphons into motion. They trotted a distance away and then bounded into the sky. The general held his own position.

He would wait for Zagros to land but wanted the escort gryphons in the sky in case the enemy attacked. If all stayed grounded, they’d be exposed and in a weaker position.

Gaius shook out his shoulders underneath his armor. He fought to maintain a calm demeanor, but his heart pounded and his mind wouldn’t settle. Memories of past interactions with Zagros, even in peaceful times, swirled around his head. The veteran was stern, smart, and unmovable.

Gaius would need his wits about him if his legion was going to survive.

The rebel flight made a high pass just in front of where Gaius waited. Volgus ruffled his feathers and stood on hind legs with wings outstretched in reply. The enemy kept a tight formation and dropped into a sudden landing. They trotted the rest of the way on the ground and Gaius signaled for his wingmen to return as well.

The general shielded his eyes against the sun to observe who Zagros had brought with him. Goras, of course, and another great gryphon rider that the general believed to be Parsas on the back of Otanes, of the

legendary Ajax line. If the rebels wanted a duel out in this desert, they'd have three great gryphons to the loyalist two.

Gaius glanced to his right to where Clavius was dismounting from the back of Ptolemas. The lesser mount was a fine war beast and would hold his own, plus the legion's air cavalry over their camp behind them was on high alert. It would be foolish for Zagros to try and kill Gaius here, even with his advantage.

Besides, the rebel had the upper hand in the coming battle. He didn't need to strike the legion's head with dirty tricks. He didn't need any rash action at all.

So why is he here? Gaius thought as at last the rebel contingent dismounted.

Zagros spoke first.

"General Gaius. Riders of the Fifteenth." He nodded around the group in turn. His posture was formal, as if he wasn't rebelling against the entire empire he used to fight for but instead greeting friends on a morning walk. "Clavius, good to see you again. Congratulations on your promotion to air captain."

Gaius needed to break this false civility quickly.

"What do you want, Zagros?"

The rebel general smiled. His teeth were yellow within his white face. He held out both hands, palms up, and then clasped them softly in front of his stomach.

"I wanted to give you a chance to surrender," he said. His shoulders twitched in a barely perceptible shrug.

Gaius's hand shifted toward his sword hilt. They could duel right here. The gryphons would fight as well, numbers be damned. He wanted to

punch the sly smile right off the rebel's face.

"Surrender?"

The general's mind was truly racing now. He glanced to the stone faces of the wingmen behind the lead rebel. Zagros knew that the Fifteenth wouldn't lay down their arms. The legion would fight until the end, no matter how dire the position became. Gaius was here to protect Talia's throne and solidify her power across the empire.

"We won't surrender," Gaius said before Zagros could speak further. "You know that. You're here to gloat."

The rebel general gave his sly smile again. He nodded his head once. Gaius chose this opportunity to make a verbal jab forward and wipe the expression from Zagros's face.

"But you can't attack us either."

Air Captain Martius, on Gaius's left, snapped his head to look at his general. Gaius pushed on as if he were fully confident in his words.

"We have high ground with the city at our backs, making encirclement difficult. Your legion has to march across the desert to attack us and we'll be ready, armed, and waiting. If you want to throw away half your men—not to mention the gryphons you'd lose fighting my air cavalry—just to get rid of me, be my guest."

Zagros wiped a hand down the side of his face and then gripped his chin. His smile fell away to a grimace.

"It's not your fault you're in this predicament," Zagros said after a few moments' thought.

"No, it's yours." Gaius nearly spat the words. "You stirred the Gurians to uprising."

“I didn’t mean this specific setting.” Zagros waved a hand over Gaius at the city. “I meant the civil war. Your brother caused the last one, so that was at least partly your fault. But you’ve taken care of him. This new war, though? You couldn’t have seen it coming.”

“With men like you, I should’ve,” Gaius said, halfway under his breath. Zagros ignored the words if he heard them at all.

“I won’t treat you as an enemy of the empire if you surrender here.” Zagros was smiling again and Gaius clenched his fists against the blood rushing to his head. “Your legion will be broken up—it has to be—but not imprisoned. You won’t face execution or be paraded through the streets. I offer you this last chance to join the winning side and remain a part of Belgada. I won’t throw away more generals and weaken our strength with so many enemies around our borders.”

Gaius diverted his eyes to the ground. He scanned over specific grains of sand, feigning consideration.

“No,” Gaius said, as definitively as he could. “I don’t believe you’ll treat us well. You won’t respect anyone in the empire except your allies. Talia is the heir to Titus. That’s the direction of Belgada and I will fight for her in his memory and all the good emperors before.”

Zagros’s eyes sparkled maliciously under his gray hair. He pursed his lips and his forehead compressed into a glare. Perhaps he’d expected Gaius to take the offer.

“So be it,” the rebel said, throwing a hand up as if to cast Gaius away. “With your choice, the Fifteenth will be crushed.”

“Do your worst,” Gaius said. He meant the words to sound stoic and hard like something out from an ancient, laconic Scipian. But the phrase didn’t carry quite the desired weight across the shifting sands. The loyalists’

precarious situation didn't help matters, with the general balancing on the brink of disaster.

Each general swung up onto their respective mounts, as did their wingmen. The gryphons glared at each other. They were entrenched on either side of the civil strife, pulled into conflict by their riders.

Gaius kicked off first and pushed Volgus back to their legion. Martius and Avorian screened against the rebels while Ptolemas held the wing position on Volgus's back right. No tricks came from the rebels.

As Volgus drifted into a landing path within the half-built camp, Gaius stared back north and wondered how they could get a gryphon through to Basilas. First Company's arrival would destroy Zagros's arrogance and flip the battle on its head.

Once all were back on the ground, Gaius looked at his two air captains. Their mounts stood at attention too.

"Now," Gaius said with clenched fists. "We prepare to fight."

Chapter 11

The most desired seat in Belgada proved quite uncomfortable. Talia's father had never complained about his long hours proceeding over court and the meetings with his advisers. He'd always been stoic and steady. She halfway felt angry at him for never warning her, but then again, she was never supposed to be the heir.

Talia fidgeted on the unforgiving wood of the throne and tried to focus on the proceedings before her. The throne had been carried down off the raised dais by multiple servants and placed at the head of the table for the council meeting. Verstappas stood on her right shoulder, looming and powerful, as always. Before her were arrayed the empire's most powerful men.

Talia glanced over the nobles as they talked and lost herself from the conversation once more. She blinked and tried to refocus, having trouble finding who was the speaker at present and what new gripe they droned about.

She thought it was Ecbas, senior consul and stalwart veteran of the senate. The noble's words seemed to echo inaudibly. Next to the first counsel was his peer, Pagus, an unabashed drunk who served his second stint as senatorial leader after being thrown out due to his liquid vice during his previous term.

Rounding out Talia's esteemed counsel was Pythias, Verstappas's opposite from the senate guard, as well as two other senior senators whose

primary names Talia couldn't remember, but she knew them to be of the Vasili and Caelian lines. Their family histories lent them power, and, from what Talia gathered, each held no other merits.

Verstappas stepped forward to draw even with Talia's perch. He spoke, and the room quieted as if he held magical sway over the others.

"We speak over the empress and don't give her room to respond," the Aptorian Guard said. His shield arm bicep flexed from underneath his shoulder armor. "I say we hear from her to avoid this cycle of bickering. Empress Talia, what say you on the grain supply?"

Talia blinked. She cleared her throat and sat up straighter. All eyes returned to her and she reddened under the attention, which felt like a red-hot glare. She'd been enjoying being invisible to the powerful men, but the final decisions of Belgada needed to come from the throne. She was supposed to be leading.

The issue of the grain trade came back to her mind like a waterfall careening off a cliff. Zagros's rebels controlled the southern reaches and were fighting on the border of Gura. The grain from the fertile fields of Ephes and Epirus was bogged down on the main trade roads and was kept from the northern harbors.

General Gaius's latest report from the Fifteenth had been confident they could break the rebels' blockade, but there was no immediate relief coming for the capital and the central and northern provinces.

"We need more caravans from Tilina, that much is clear," Talia said at last. The solution appeared in her mind and she spoke it out loud at the same time. "We can't have the stores running low and we can't assume Gaius breaks Zagros's hold on the south anytime soon, even though I hope he will."

“Great idea, Empress,” Consul Pagus said. Leaning forward, he stared up the table at Talia, one hand gripped tightly around a goblet. “But there’s the matter of cost.”

This consul was supposed to be the Master of Treasury, but Talia now remembered his full reason for losing his seat previously. He’d been stealing from the coffers to fund his multiple wine cellars.

Talia hardened her glare and cast it around the entire table. “I sit in a room with walls inlaid with gold, I believe we can find the money to feed our people, Consul. Pay the Tilians a fair market price and restore our reserves.”

Pagus opened his mouth to argue back, but Verstappas silenced him.

“See that it’s done, Consul,” the guard said.

Quiet fell across the room like an ambushing legion. Talia fought to keep her back straight and her posture regal. She wished her bodyguard would let her speak for herself, but at the same time was thankful for the forcefulness of his voice and the deference the other advisors showed him. All eyes looked down at the table except for the leader of the senatorial guard.

Captain Pythias leaned back in his chair with his chin tilted upward. He glared over his nose at the Aptorian. A slight grin grew on his mouth.

Consul Ecbas stirred and pushed the council forward. He glanced around the room before settling on Talia’s face.

“We’re pushing to hold the traitor Bardylis’s trial by month’s end, Empress.”

Pagus leaned forward as if he had been shoved. “It must happen sooner. We can’t have the rebel hanging over the city. You can feed the commoners,

but the temptation of unrest—even from the idea of Bardylis—is too much for our populace.”

Talia didn’t need to be lectured by these men on the threat from the captive. Her own brother had rebelled with Bardylis. Thousands of Belgadan citizens, her father included, had died with their actions. She wasn’t a young girl, however much they thought that to be true.

Though Pagus’s words weren’t completely empty in their worry. The traitor Bardylis still breathed, and that was threat enough.

Consul Ecbas had clearly been dragging out the legal process around the rebel. There were procedures and plenty of bureaucracy within the Belgadan system, but Talia observed the consul’s actions carefully. She and Verstappas had talked at length about the potential for more traitors seeking to gain power through further rebellion. And some of them could be sitting on this very council.

“Consul—” Talia made to speak, but Ecbas was already talking over her.

Pagus juttet in as well and the table would’ve devolved into more argument had Verstappas not cleared his throat from Talia’s side. Silence fell over the men once more and Pythias’s grin grew larger at the far end of the room.

“I was going to say.” Talia cleared her throat. “Consul Ecbas is proceeding through the normal legal process for the traitor’s trial. I would ask the judiciary to speed up the process where possible, but I know he is doing his best against this threat to the empire.”

“I will continue pushing, Princess.” Ecbas nodded with a grim mouth set below scheming eyes. “I mean Empress, apologies.”

“Thank you,” Talia said and allowed the meeting to move on to further topics.

The meeting proceeded to its end relatively quickly and Talia stood and dismissed her council members once the arguing slowed. They bowed and left the room and the murmurs of their further dissents against each other echoed back to Talia’s position. She wanted to collapse back into the throne, but knew there would be no comfort found there. Her legs were tight and screamed up at her for relief she couldn’t offer.

“Good job, Princess,” Verstappas said. He was the only advisor Talia didn’t mind calling her by her old title. It was endearing from the bodyguard she’d known for so long.

With a barely concealed smile, Talia thought of Halys and knew the Tyrhian captain, were she here, would call her Princess as well. But alas, that stalwart ally was off in the west with her ships, protecting the empire’s coast.

“What’s next?” Talia said as she stepped away from the uncomfortable chair. Servants were already entering the room to rearrange the counsel table and haul the throne back up on the raised dais.

“Aeris Hyburda, freshly returned from the front, requests an audience.” Verstappas spoke in a flat tone, but his eyes watched closely for Talia’s reaction.

“No.”

“The next would be Epaphras Cael, then.” Verstappas pulled a scroll out from under his tunic and opened it. “If not him, Arippus of house Vasili.”

“No. What do they all want?” Talia glared at the list.

Verstappas rolled the parchment and put it in his pocket, as if he regretted ever taking the piece out in the first place. “We’ve discussed this,

Princess. Suitors will want an audience with you. It might be a nice break from the worries of leading.”

“I don’t want to talk to nobles; that’s hardly a break. I must feign interest in the issues they bring up and the jokes they tell. My face hurts from just thinking about all the fake smiling.”

“I—”

“The answer is no,” Talia said. She tried to put the same force behind her words that Verstappas had used with the councilmen earlier.

“As you wish,” the bodyguard said. “You’re the leader of this empire, but you’re also available for courtship and the most sought-after woman within its borders.”

Talia pierced her bodyguard’s face with a glare.

“Most women would like that, Princess. They envy your status.”

The bodyguard’s gaze was fatherly upon her. Talia had rarely seen anything but the cold hardness of Verstappas’s Scipian upbringing. The guard was making a conscious and straining effort to replace part of her father for the empire’s new leader. Only this fact kept Talia from exploding in response to his comment about what she should desire.

There would be a long list—far longer than could be held within a single scroll—of people she would like to converse with before the capital’s spoiled noble boys. A few names bubbled to the top of that list clearly within her mind. Halys and Air Captain Martius were highest of all, of course.

But alas, most of her allies were far away, fighting for her and the uncomfortable chair now being carried to the dais.

The brief thought of the young rider bonded to the great gryphon Avorian caused her heart to flutter. There were many reasons to quell the

rebellion in the empire's south, but the one that Talia held most dear was Martius's return to the capital. Axias, resting in the gryphon tower, sent a resounding caw of agreement through their bond.

The empress wondered if the rider had received her letter and the military history book she'd sent. Verstappas and Solos had recommended the Memnas Campaign letters. She hoped Martius liked the gift.

Talia had never been much interested in history, even the recent records of past emperors that impacted her family. Perhaps she should start paying more attention and reading like Martius. That would give them more to talk about when all this fighting was over. It may also give her ideas for how to deal with her meddling councilmen.

Over all these thoughts, Martius's face hung brightly within Talia's mind and made her feel warm. She took a steadying breath. She quelled her embarrassing girlish feelings quickly.

"Thank you, Verstappas. I don't feel like another audience today. Please ask my fine noble suitors to return another time."

Verstappas's lip twitched up in what—by the bodyguard's standards—amounted to a smirk. "As you wish, Empress."

Talia gave a brief curtsy of thanks, as if she was still a princess and was bidding her father goodbye. But the guard had used her new title, one of supreme command of the entire empire, and that reminded Talia that she wasn't a naive girl anymore. She was grown and completely alone atop Belgada's realm.

"Go fly with your gryphon, Princess." Verstappas's fatherly tone returned.

"Thank you, Verstappas, for all you do," Talia said. His suggestion was a fantastic one.

The bodyguard bowed and the empress left the hall and marched up through the palace on her own. Verstappas had been leaving Talia alone more and more. They spent more time together on the whole, given the constant council meetings and audience duties of her schedule. But she was thankful the bodyguard had come to realize that being a permanent shadow wasn't healthy for either of them.

The Scipian was processing his own demons, Talia knew. He still had yet to touch a sword except when his duty demanded. The guard beat himself up too much over the death of her father and his perceived failures. He'd been drilling the Aptorians hard and strained to ensure that Talia wouldn't meet the same fate.

The empress could relate to his feelings. As she walked to the palace hallways, there were screaming memories of knives in the dark and bloodstains seeping into thick carpets. The night her father was attacked echoed. It was a plague on her home. There was no escaping, except when she could fly and Axias helped her forget the world and all its troubles for a moment.

The stable master Solos stuck his head out of his chambers as Talia marched up the final hallway to the gryphon roost. He smiled and opened his mouth to start a conversation, but Talia pushed past at speed.

Her riding clothes and boots were up in the gryphon's stable already. She could change, mount up, and shoot off for the horizon in no time and didn't want delays. The oppressive palace would soon be behind her. Whatever Solos wanted to talk about could wait until she returned.

Axias was feigning sleep as Talia entered the top level of the tower. The empress knew her mount would've felt her coming and should've been

ready for flight. But the gryphon exuded annoyance that her rider had taken so long to return to her.

“I have duties,” Talia said. “I don’t like them any more than you do.”

The gryphon kept her head on the ground.

“I’d fly all day if I could, you know that.”

No movement.

“Fine, we won’t fly, then.”

Before Talia could begin her bluff of turning around, Axias bolted to her feet.

She shook out her feathers and took a step toward Talia. The empress reached out a hand to caress the mount’s head, but Axias suddenly stiffened.

“What?” Talia said before realizing the need for silence. Axias cocked her head.

The empress wasn’t sure if it was the gryphon’s ears or some kind of higher sense that felt the new presence approaching. Solos had discussed gryphon bonds with her before, though the entire concept, even with holding a bond herself, was above her. Either way, Axias warned of a foreign arrival within the gryphon stables.

Talia’s human ears caught up to the situation as boots sounded on the tower’s stairs. That confirmed Axias’s worries. The empress’s earlier appreciation toward Verstappas for leaving her alone flew back in her face as fear gripped her shoulders and crawled up her neck.

Someone approached the royal level of the stables who wasn’t supposed to be here.

The empress had left the door ajar and the hinges creaked as the intruder entered. Talia spotted heavy boots under the walls of the first stable, slinking forward. Something about the leather of the shoes and the pace of

the walk ticked Talia's memory, but her breath still caught as she backed away to the far side of her mount.

Axias crept forward with a lowered head. The intruder came around the wall.

Captain Halys stood smiling at them both.

Talia's heart flung back to full speed. She rushed to the Tyrhian and threw out her arms for a hug. Halys's eyes widened and she nearly took a step away, but Talia didn't give the captain a chance to escape. The empress struck her with a hug and gripped her tight. She held the embrace a long while.

At last, she stepped back and the two friends, one Tyrhian warrior, one empress of Belgada, took in each other with wide, sparkling smiles.

Chapter 12

Zagros stopped his army's approach, allowing the dust cloud to finally settle off the horizon. The sky was now bright and clear and hostile. Specks circled over the enemy position, constantly reminding Martius of Goras and Hoplas and the screen of the rebel air cavalry in the sky that kept the loyalists trapped and outnumbered.

Avorian snacked behind his rider. The gryphon picked up a whole pecan and tossed it in the air before lashing out and crunching the nut with his beak. He then trotted in a happy circle and chewed loudly with his head tilting back and forth.

Martius wasn't sure how his mount could relax in their present situation. The rider had barely been able to sit during his brief moments between work. His mind was too alive with fretting.

The main contingent of the Fifteenth needed to get word to Basilas and First Company up at Lectra. Only with the additional numbers of those fresh troops could the legion have hope for victory, and even then the odds looked long.

Martius was sore and he knew the grounded legionnaires who'd fought through the streets of Gura would be faring even worse. The rider's leg cut had healed. He wasn't quite at Avorian's amazing recovery rate, though he was already feeling better.

But they still had unknown days of fighting ahead of them.

“I figured you’d be limping more,” a voice said from the side of the pen.

Martius turned and found Sergeant Nessa leaning against the fence, hips out to one side, cheek resting on one hand. The air captain stole a worried glance at Avorian. The gryphon was distracted by his snacking. Phalos, Nessa’s demigryph, wasn’t with his rider to cause jealousy anyway.

Martius walked over, now conscious of his gait and how the healed injury affected it.

“There’s more of what I expected.” Nessa giggled slightly behind the words. Martius felt his face grow warmer.

“How fared your unit in the fighting?”

“We didn’t even make it in the city.” Nessa straightened and waved away a desert fly from her face. “Just as well. Phalos hates sphinxes.”

Martius grinned. “Avorian didn’t like them either.” He looked back to his mount and was pleased to find him trotting happily around the feeding troughs.

“I just returned from a scouting run,” Nessa said. “They’ve got cavalry on their left and a strong force of infantry.”

Martius and various other gryphon riders had been able to fly close enough to estimate Zagros’s numbers earlier as well. The rebel had a little more than a full legion with him, including auxiliary troops in the rear and on his western flank by the river. These extra soldiers appeared to be Sarissa like the messenger who’d requested the parlay the day previous. Somehow, General Zagros had allied with the tribes he’d been fighting against for a decade.

“The cavalry is Sarissa, apparently,” Martius said.

Nessa only shrugged at the news. She was a veteran and wasn't fazed by the strange news.

Martius reddened again as a stretch of silence fell between them. He occupied his mind by watching Avorian across the pen and dwelling on how they'd get news of the legion's predicament to Basilas and the First. Nessa spoke after a few more moments.

"Good luck with the flights today." She stepped away from the fence and put her back to Martius. She looked over her shoulder with a smile as she left him, hips swaying.

Martius shook his head and chided himself for his eyes drifting downward. He'd be greatly ashamed if Talia ever saw him acting like this, especially in the middle of a war.

The rider cleared his throat and then climbed out of the pen and headed in the opposite direction through camp. He marched up through the camp to the front gate where Air Captains Clavius and Anshas waited. They stared out across the undulations of desert between them and the enemy. On their left, the Gura River glimmered peacefully.

"Any pattern to their movement?" Martius asked.

"None that I've seen." Clavius shook his head.

"I don't think we can get through," Anshas said.

Martius agreed with him but didn't want to be dour.

"We can try going at night, slipping through the darkness." Clavius tilted his head to one side.

With this task before him, Martius felt green and immature. Goras had been fighting on the back of Hoplas for decades. How could they possibly outsmart him?

“They’ll have a screen up even at night. Gryphon eyes are strong enough in the dark. They won’t let us through,” Martius said after a moment’s thought.

He’d been passed enough nighttime images from Avorian’s eyes to know how strong they were.

The rider looked at Anshas. “What would Demas do here?” he asked, painfully remembering their former officer.

“I don’t know, give up?” Anshas presented one hand out with his palm up. He was always an optimist.

Martius rolled his eyes. Clavius fixed Anshas with a glare.

“Seriously,” Martius said.

The rider dropped his hand back to his side and narrowed his eyes, looking north. “Best I can think is we need to draw them away from the central position. If they let us get around the east or west flank, great. If not, we’re spreading out their line. A hole could form.”

“True,” Martius said.

“They have more gryphons than us,” Clavius said. Even with the injured mounts making full recoveries, the air corps was outnumbered.

But then Clavius pointed at Anshas. “They have to be alert and watching all of us, though. We should increase our movement to make that difficult.”

Martius nodded and stayed silent.

His eyes scanned the horizon. He counted three specks at present. He blinked slowly and passed his mind through his bond with Avorian to peer out his mount’s eyes. The gryphon, having finished with the last of his pecans and launched into flight above the camp, turned and focused on the distant enemy.

There were indeed three rebel mounts in the sky, two of them great gryphons. One circled over the center of their camp and the others held the flanks. All waited for Martius's next move.

The air captain took in a breath and held it. He stared at the sand around his boots and kicked at a nearby rock. With an exhale, he settled on his decision.

"Call the other riders," he said to Clavius. "We need everyone up in the air."

* * *

Martius broke westward with Clavius and Aristas in tow. Anshas held the center with Epicas and Tycus while the remaining air cavalry broke east. Groups of rebel gryphons shadowed them. The enemies were only distant dots, but it was clear they were ready for a fight. Loyalist gryphons spread out as discussed and Martius hoped for the best in the chaos they created.

The rider leaned over Avorian's side and watched the river pass below them. Bright desert sun sparkled off the water and made the greenish blue shine even brighter. He could see shadows from schools of fish weaving just underneath the waves and a long, dark blot of a crocodile creeping in the shallows along the far bank.

Then Avorian was out the other side and more desert rumbled below them. The land turned from arid into something slightly greener, with vegetation sparse and withered-looking. Some hills were covered in shrubs and hints of a gnarly forest blotted the horizon to the south.

The enemy gryphons held their pace with Martius's group. They outnumbered Martius's trio, but he couldn't be sure by how much.

He angled Avorian slightly north and closed the gap between enemy and loyalists, watching for what the enemy would do in reaction. The rebels broke closer as well. There were four of them in tight formation.

Martius caught a good glimpse of them through Avorian's eyes as they split into pairs of wingmen. The group separated and held in front and behind Avorian's path. The wing-gryphons Ptolemas and Tarchus stayed close behind their leader and waited for orders.

Martius shifted Avorian using only a twitch of his reins. They straightened to head due west again and the enemy gryphons held their mirrored positions. The sky was clear. There were no clouds to hide a flanking attack from above. But there would also be no masking any of the loyalist gryphons if they tried to break north.

Martius pattered out a breath through loose lips and reluctantly pulled Avorian southward in a wide turn. He purposely put their rear to the enemy and watched them out of the corner of his eye. The rebels matched their maneuver, swinging north instead of south and allowing the gap between the two sides to widen. Their pairs of wingmen converged to form a full group and followed Martius in a full turn eastward toward their starting position.

Martius twisted in the saddle and found Clavius's eye. The new rider shrugged, holding tight to Ptolemas's back. Martius then looked to Aristas. Tarchus's rider turned a finger north, his eyes a focused glare.

Warmth pushed through Martius's bond with Avorian. The gryphon agreed. They must try.

"All right, then," Martius said to the wind as it howled past his ears.

There was no need to command Avorian with the reins. Martius merely dropped the leather straps and pressed himself low over his mount's neck. His fellow riders did the same just as Avorian banked hard to the north.

Martius was crushed into the back of his mount by the force of the movement. The wind's whistle turned into a screech. The thrum of Avorian's wings boomed and the gap to the rebels closed in an instant.

Each enemy aggressively met the attack. The two widest rebels broke away vertically, one high, one low. The middle mounts closed together as Avorian made straight for them.

Even with his great gryphon's assistance, Martius hadn't gotten a clear view of these enemies. But now they screamed into each other's face. There was no mistaking their opponent.. It was Hoplas with Goras snarling on his back.

There was another great gryphon with him, but the others were lesser beasts. Martius and Avorian had to defeat them.

The lead air captain flashed one finger back to Aristas, pointing upward. Then he showed a fist to Clavius and pressed it against his back.

All in a flash. All within a moment before impact.

Hoplas broke high, as ordered. Clavius held his flight path. In the next blink of Martius's eye, Goras was right on top of him. The rebel's snarl had turned to a scream with his teeth bright and pointy, hair streaming out behind his helm. His eyes were bright and red in the sunlight.

Avorian, with Ptolemas in tow, dropped his flight and twisted to avoid the dangling claws of Hoplas. Martius was twisted around watching Goras's yell turn to an angry snarl when the rebel air wake hit him. It pressed him tighter into the saddle before they were out the other side.

Goras and his rebel wingman split as they circled and fell on Martius's tail. The air captain struggled to adjust himself back in the saddle.

Avorian broke off his path. They had a gap to run north, but they couldn't run all the way to Basilas, certainly not with two great gryphons on their tail. The war beast screeched, half in frustration and half in warning to his wing-gryphon, and then angled westward.

Martius looked back to watch the trailing enemies. He tried to catch sight of Aristas at the same time, knowing the other loyalist faced two enemies by himself. He spotted the other duel high above with Aristas on Tarchus chasing one of the rebels and the other tight on their tail.

Martius found Avorian's reins and pulled them into a path crossing below their ally. The rebel great gryphons were gaining on them and Ptolemas strained to keep up in Avorian's wake. Martius had mere heartbeats to make a decision and puzzle his way out the situation.

Retreat was certainly an option. The flight wasn't going to break through here. Perhaps others in the air cavalry had found more success. But hoping for luck wasn't the Belgadan way. Fortune would only get Martius so far, and it always favored the brave.

No, retreat actually wasn't an option

The air captain flicked a hand signal back to Clavius. It wasn't much of a warning, but it was all Martius could give his tail. Martius then sent his mount careening into the rear lesser gryphon chasing Aristas and Tarchus.

Avorian rolled sideways. Martius had to squeeze his legs against the gryphon's flanks to stay in the saddle. They swept in hard from directly below the rebel gryphon. The target never saw them coming.

Avorian righted himself and dropped his claws, talons extended. He swiped with his right front as the enemy gryphon buckled in flight at the

last moment. Martius didn't feel the contact, but he heard a screech overlapping a human scream.

Out the other side, he whipped his head around and caught sight of a tumbling gryphon. The mount fought and righted itself, his rider still in the saddle. But Aristas had been freed in his chase.

Avorian turned back to the fray from the flank, spiraling lower and giving Martius a great view of the next proceedings in the duels. Ptolemas, alone with two great gryphons still on his tail, made the most of the situation and flicked upward and into the path of the mount Tarchus chased. Clavius's gryphon swiped across the front of the lesser rebel's path, missing contact but forcing the enemy off his dive. Ptolemas's tail barreled in after him. The two great gryphons separated, and each followed a loyalist. Tarchus banked and Ptolemas rolled into an evasive dive.

Martius glanced to the open sky in the north. He was free and two of the enemy war beasts were momentarily scattered from the duel. The remaining mounts were great gryphons, but they were focused on Martius's wingmen. Avorian could get away potentially unseen and outrun any of the other mounts the rebels had at their disposal in the rear.

But his wingmen were in trouble. He wouldn't sacrifice the gryphons merely to act as a messenger, however important the information they carried. Avorian clicked his beak in agreement. He spread his wings to power them forward to help their allies.

Hoplas chased Ptolemas in his dive. Tarchus twisted and twirled in the air with the other rebel mount even closer to him. Martius nudged Avorian with his right leg. The war beast darted to Ptolemas and plunged into Hoplas's flank. The rebel mount's eye widened upon spotting the sweeping attack. He broke away, but Avorian took the opening to fall in on his tail.

They were still vertical, gaining speed even as the ground approached. Ptolemas peeled away and went to help Tarchus. Martius held tight behind Goras. Avorian was in control.

The ground hemmed the duel in vertically and the loyalists held a dominant angle. Both gryphons cupped their wings and Avorian pushed through the unstable air flowing off the back of his target. He'd catch Hoplas if the rebel attempted to pull up.

Goras glanced backward. The rebel's glare was sharp and full of malice. Martius held his gaze steady, seeking to show Goras they wouldn't be intimidated. But this meant his eyes were off Hoplas.

The rebel's wings shot out and they slammed almost to a stop in midair. Avorian had no time to react, at full speed and within the slippery wind from the gryphon's wake. He buckled and threw their path to the side and only narrowly missed the rebel. The hard desert sand barreled upward at them.

Avorian opened his own wings but didn't slow nearly as quickly as his rebel opposite. He flapped and fluttered to one side and then banked to fling low along the ground. His legs lifted and only barely avoided smacking a dune that reared up before them.

The duel reversed. Goras closed from behind, neck outstretched and beak open. They sped over the dunes and wove between the peaks of the sand. Without looking behind him, Avorian darted to the left, spraying up sand down the slope of a hill.

Hoplas watched him. Avorian feigned farther left and then swept to the right up the next dune. This rise was severe, almost a sheer wall. Avorian's talons dragged through the sand. The rebel didn't react in time. The scarred

gryphon tilted right briefly before pulling up and sending his wings out to buffer his speed to avoid the cliffside.

Avorian was away and Martius turned to watch Hoplas spin in the air and head the other direction. The loyalist gryphon rose back to altitude, gaining more space from his pursuer. Hoplas didn't sweep back into attack but instead held on their left flank a good distance away. Above Martius, he spotted Ptolemas and Tarchus flying against three rebels. The allies wheeled about with the rebels crisscrossing between them.

A stalemate.

Muttering to himself once more, Martius directed Avorian toward their allies.

The rider watched the gryphons twirl above him and waited for an opening. Hoplas and Goras flew in on their periphery. Martius drew out his sword and held it aloft, then snapped his reins to fully release Avorian.

They pushed Hoplas's flank as the rebel mount hooked around behind Ptolemas. The rebel felt Avorian and dived for free air.

Martius's mount held back some of his pace in pursuit, having learned his lesson from the first scrap. The caution was merited as Hoplas soon ripped out his wings again and slammed to another stop. Avorian twitched out of the way before slowing himself and swinging back to attacking altitude.

The rider thought Avorian had done well in evading Hoplas. But when Martius turned to check behind them, his eyes widened at spotting their rebel opposite barreling in on their tail.

Avorian wasn't half as surprised. He rolled vertically and careened toward the sand. Hoplas followed and closed the gap with a single flap of his wings, launching himself at the loyalist's hindquarters. Avorian twisted

further, inverting himself, and attempted to evade, but the rebel's lunge was already on him.

The gryphons locked talons. They leveled off above the sand dunes, fighting, barreling east, and screeching over each other. Martius held on with his free hand and squeezed both his legs against the saddle. They rolled and Hoplas screeched and a spray of blood splattered into the wind. The loyalist rider's world spun. Through the turmoil, he made out Goras holding up a spear.

The traitor raised the weapon. He started a thrust, plunging the shaft through Avorian's guard and toward his front shoulder where the breastplate ended. Martius snapped downward with his short sword. He forgot about the forces pushing his body against his gryphon or the wind attempting to hurl him off into the air. There was only the deadly blow and a last chance to block it.

His sword clanged against the spear and knocked it off target. The shaft smacked the middle of Avorian's breastplate. The great gryphon's talons then came in to swipe across the weapon, yanking it from Goras's grasp. For a moment, frozen within Martius's mind, it appeared the rebel rider would lose his balance. His arms flailed and he rolled forward. Hoplas bucked beneath him. But then Goras's hands found the reins and his scarred gryphon kicked away and righted himself under his rider.

Avorian leveled as well and flung them to the south. Martius fought to catch his breath. The image of Goras's spear thrusting toward his mount played through his mind, echoing backward and forward with deadly clarity. Avorian had been vulnerable. Martius exhaled. His heart hammered out of control.

Ptolemas and Tarchus flew up behind them, free of their duels as well. The two sides separated and the air calmed over the desert.

Neither side had taken a casualty. The rebel defenders held their sky tightly. Martius glanced east, back to the Fifteenth's camp. Perhaps one of the other loyalist flights had found success. But even as he thought through the possibility, he realized his hope was small. They wouldn't find good news when they returned to ground.

Chapter 13

Martius didn't sleep. Morning broke and his body somehow felt refreshed and ready. He'd grown used to fatigue through this endless fighting.

But all his strength wouldn't solve the legion's troubles. They were still trapped.

The rider sighed and looked at Avorian beside him. Rider and gryphon sat in the sand outside the camp walls. Martius had his knees up, arms clasped around them, with his head low. Avorian rested taller and watched the flights of gryphons over the enemy camp.

Martius had never felt as close to losing Avorian as he had yesterday. The night had flown by, like a quick flap of a gryphon's wings, but the rider dwelt on Goras's bloodied spear tip thrusting towards Avorian's heart and striking true and their bond shattering and both falling to their end. He shuddered and tried to push away the thoughts.

Avorian stood and brought his head down to nuzzle against Martius's face. The gryphon kept reminding Martius of his quick parry and his bravery in protecting the war beast. Avorian wasn't unsettled like his rider. He'd lived through numerous battles and was adept at moving on to the next one. He'd faced graver danger than a simple spear.

Footsteps sounded from behind and Martius turned, expecting Clavius or one of his air captains approaching to relay the morning's positions. Instead, it was General Gaius, alone, with his head down as he walked.

Martius scrambled to his feet and saluted. "Good morning, General."

"Morning, Martius."

Gaius stopped next to the air captain and put his hands behind his back. A long few moments of silence stretched between them. Volgus drifted overhead, wind fluttering through his wing feathers, and the general's eyes tracked the slow movement.

"Can we get through today?" Gaius asked eventually.

"We'll try, sir."

Martius gritted his teeth. He wished he could think of a masterful tactical plan like Attalus would've if the hero emperor were in this situation.

"Goras might make a mistake and all we need is one gryphon to get past," he added, trying to sound confident.

Gaius nodded. He reached over and rested a hand on Martius's shoulder. "Volgus and I can go where you need us. Zagros isn't going to attack with his infantry just yet."

"You sure about that, sir?" Martius stared across the desert. The distance between the two armies was great and there was no movement or signs of activity from the enemy grounded troops.

"I'm certain," Gaius said.

Martius lifted his chin and set his mouth in a hard line. "Then we'll make it through them. We must."

"We must," Gaius agreed. His hand squeezed Martius's shoulder once and then fell away.

The rider felt better talking to the legion's commander. There were still flashes of spear tips and danger and the overwhelming fear of losing Avorian, but Martius could persevere.

Gaius's head tilted upward again and Volgus broke from his glide and banked downward to land. The air captain mounted Avorian as Volgus trotted up to his own rider.

"I'll signal you if you've needed, General," Martius said. "Monitor the center for now and watch for any tricks from Zagros."

"Agreed." Gaius turned from the sand whirling after Volgus's landing and then grabbed his mount's reins.

The general put a boot in the stirrups and hauled himself into the saddle. The two riders locked eyes for a final moment before splitting. Martius saluted. Gaius returned the gesture.

Volgus took back to the sky and Martius and Avorian both watched their wide circle of the camp perimeter. When Martius brought his eyes back to the ground level, his air cavalymen were emerging from the gate and lining up for the day's duels.

Martius kicked Avorian into motion and approached at a trot. Clavius stepped up to greet them.

"Flights ready?" Martius asked as he dismounted.

"Ready." Clavius stood in a strong stance with legs wide and arms crossed in front of him. The soldier looked solid.

Their two gryphons were tensed for action as well. Ptolemas rested on his hind legs but had his chest up high and his neck erect. Avorian turned his beak up and then nodded this fellow mount before looking over the row of others.

Martius had further questions.

"You and Anshas understand your role?" His eyes darted to Anshas's place in the line.

Clavius smiled, understanding Martius's worry. The expression seemed out of place on such a morning.

"We're ready, Martius."

The Fifteenth's commanding air captain exhaled, still fretting. If anything, the ground still felt unstable, as if they were out on the ocean in high seas and not in a dry desert.

"Let's get these war beasts off the ground." Clavius beckoned Martius forward.

The gryphon riders were armored and armed and held focused gazes on their leader as they waited for final orders. No one betrayed fatigue. Everyone knew the plan and the ultimate goal that was riding on the wings of their mounts.

Martius marched to the middle where space have been left for himself and Clavius. Avorian trotted up the line, eyeing each of the gryphons. He pivoted, keeping his head high, gaze cast over the mounts on the return trip. Martius let the great gryphon finish his survey.

Satisfied with what he observed, Avorian stopped in his position next to his rider. Clavius, on Martius's right, looked at his commander. Anshas stood on the opposite side and turned his head in a mirrored motion.

"Ready?" Martius asked.

"We'll break through today. One of us has to," Clavius said.

Behind him, Ptolemas cawed in agreement. Avorian gave a huff as well. Anshas took another tact.

"I don't see how we find a path against them." He nodded to the north and the enemy gryphons already circling in the sky.

Martius looked at the air captain. It somehow soothed him to hear another rider have doubts. Anshas was never confident, even when they were fighting Sprawlings without gryphons or armor or discipline. Today was a different matter, but all men had worries. It was only the brave that pushed through them.

“We’ll find it, Anshas,” Martius said. Strength welled up behind his words and he gave a stiff nod to reinforce the sensation. “We break apart, stick to the plan. Ponderas takes the west, swing as wide as she can. Ptolema breaks east.” He looked back to Clavius and the two riders met eyes. “Let’s fly.”

Clavius grinned. Martius raised a hand and circled it above his head, one finger pointed to the sky.

“Our legion is trapped,” he said for the entire group. “Let’s go set it free.”

The air corps mounted up. Martius let the other gryphons kick into the sky first. Avorian held steady with his eyes passing along the entire width of the aerial formation as it formed. Rebel riders erupted from the horizon in response.

Martius squeezed his heels against Avorian’s flanks. The great gryphon launched and flapped upward until they were above the line of his air corps. The battlefield stretched before them, open ground and clear skies in all directions. Rebels formed a line of death in the distance. He waited only a moment longer before releasing his gryphons.

He flicked out a hand signal. Two groups, heading east and west, split and powered away to the extreme flanks. Only Avorian and Volgus, the latter holding a position in the rear, stayed in the center.

The rebels shadowed both sides. They had more mounts in their flight pattern and looked like magical wraiths of dark smoke spreading out from some evil crevice. One enemy mirrored Avorian's hover. This was Martius's opposite. This was someone who was watching Avorian specifically.

Goras. Hoplas. The rebel air captain wanted to finish what he'd failed to do yesterday.

The bloody spear cut through Martius's thoughts once more. He tightened his grip on the reins. Avorian shook his head below him. The gryphon yanked against the leather straps and Martius blinked away his fear. Together, they would defeat the aggressive evil of these rebels. They could outfly Hoplas.

Martius spat over the side of Avorian's saddle. His great gryphon screeched over the battlefield. Martius released the reins and let Avorian commence.

They accelerated and raced east, opposite of the day previous. They caught up to the group of allied gryphons and Avorian fell in to lead the wedge formation.

Hoplas and Goras kept pace with them. The two sides of the battle were set.

Solid land holding the river in fell away to true desert just beyond the legion's eastern picket line. The ground became loose and sand billowed in small whirlwinds. Dunes built on one another and the ground rose in heaps and mounds. Martius planned to use the landscape to their advantage.

Martius threw another glance north and found Goras. A flash through Avorian's bond showed him a clearer picture of the enemy with his superior eyesight. Goras's cloak whipped behind him and Hoplas stared daggers across the field through his slash of a scar.

Avorian welcomed his enemy's aggression. Where Martius dwelt on the rebels having the upper hand, Avorian relished the trial of turning the tide against the rebels. He would use their rashness against them.

The rider drew out his sword. Clavius and the other air captains in the wedge behind did the same. Their gryphons plummeted for the sand.

Avorian leveled and swung them on a path between two of the higher dunes. The rebels could match their altitude, but they would lose sight of the loyalists. As his mount twisted through a particularly tricky contour on the sandy valley, Martius looked back at Clavius. The other air captain gave the briefest of nods and then broke formation with Ptolemas.

Ptolemas dropped away lower and to the southeast, slowing and falling behind the main wedge. Avorian picked up his pace.

Martius hoped the change wouldn't be noticed as they approached the end of their dune barrier. Avorian twisted sideways to push their wedge north around the hill and angle directly for the enemy.

The great gryphon screeched again as the rebels shifted to meet the attack. The Fifteenth's formation tightened behind him. Martius held his sword aloft and let it gleam in the desert sunlight. Goras, from the very center of the rebel swarm, had his mouth open in a war cry, teeth sharp and bright within the maw.

The two formations meshed, slamming through each other and then streaking out in all directions. Gryphons dipped and rolled, scattering into gaps and falling into their dueling dances. Martius lost track of his wingmen and the larger battle. There was only the snarling Goras and Hoplas before them.

Avorian tilted to the right, feigning an inverted dive. Hoplas took the bait and dropped his own altitude just as Avorian righted himself and

hurtled above his enemy.

The great gryphon hooked, compressing Martius's chest and threatening to yank him out of the saddle. They swung around on Hoplas's tail. The rebel broke farther east, trying to climb to a higher altitude. Avorian fell close behind his target.

Goras twisted in the saddle. His mount wove in a string of evasive maneuvers. Avorian bore down on them. Hoplas swung left and right and rolled in between to keep the loyalist at bay. Martius tried to stay as low as possible to lend more speed to his mount. They slowly gained on the target.

Hoplas then folded his wings and plummeted. He made for the peak of a dune, sweeping over the apex and over the backside. Martius blinked, something jarring him. But the action was too fast for his mind. Avorian followed the same path and the duel ripped onward, the rider's thoughts clipping forward.

They dropped into the sandy valley and followed Hoplas skirting the edge of another dune. The enemy gryphon slowed and flew up another slope. Martius's thoughts finally caught up. The memory from the previous peak solidified. His hands groped for the reins, but he was too late.

Hoplas's front talons released. He'd picked up sand on top of the first dune and now released the grains behind him in a cloud. The stinging shower smacked into their pursuer.

Avorian screeched and broke off his flight. Martius turned his face and shielded it with a forearm. Sand bit into his exposed skin. By the time they righted themselves, Goras and Hoplas had disappeared.

Avorian shook his head and flapped them into a slow landing. Talons touched down on sand and Avorian scratched at his eyes with a front talon.

Martius watched the empty sky. All was quiet except the pounding deep within his ears.

Avorian's instincts screamed a warning. He felt the rush behind them before he heard the sounds. The air moved, pressure shifting.

Hoplas's wings snapped through the simmering heat rising off the desert floor. Avorian rolled and kicked out his hind legs. The move parried the initial swipe of Hoplas's talons and pushed them into space to recover.

Avorian shook his head, further clearing his eyes, and set his feet in a defensive stance. Hoplas skidded to a stop and pivoted to face his target. He only waited a breath before pressing his advantage. Goras held a sword aloft this time and Martius brought his own up and pointed it straight out between them and the rushing war mount. Avorian managed a screech just before contact. Hoplas added a snarl. And Avorian was knocked backward across the desert floor.

Hoplas struck high. Avorian twisted his back to take away much of the momentum and swung his hind legs up and around to scrape the enemy's flank. Martius swung blindly over one wing with his blade but felt the clang of Goras's parry. The fray barreled across the sand.

Avorian shoved away and tried to bound, but Hoplas kept close. Every leap was mirrored by the enemy and Martius had to parry two flashing thrusts from Goras's sword. At last, Avorian managed to duck under an aggressive lunge from the scarred gryphon and skitter in a new direction.

Hoplas let out a snarl and paced just out of striking distance, both war beasts catching their breath. Martius heaved his chest up and down as well. He'd lost his helmet at some point during the rolling. The rider spun his sword in his hand, staying ready for when the next attack came. He blinked against the glaring sunlight.

The enemy waited.

Martius saw Goras look at the sky. The loyalist air captain did the same and tried to count his mounts and assess their status quickly. It was difficult to tell, but it seemed that his smaller contingent was holding its own and properly distracting the enemy. He couldn't see Clavius and hoped that meant Ptolemas was well away and already heading north, free of chasing rebels.

Hope was all their ruse had left.

Martius and Avorian didn't need to defeat Hoplas and the rebel rider. Their role was to distract them. Martius blinked and refocused, his sword still slowly spinning, sharp and ready. The sun was directly behind Hoplas.

Goras smirked, bright teeth shining out of his silhouette. He pointed his blade at Martius. Avorian scraped at the sand before stamping his claws firmly down and cawing, beckoning Hoplas to attack.

The rebel mount obliged.

Instead of flinging straight at them, the mount altered his approach. He leaped in the air and flapped twice in approach. Avorian bolted to one side and kicked into the air himself to take the duel skyward.

Hoplas was on them, screeching. His talons flexed and stretched outward and his wings spread wide as he pounced. Avorian banked to catch Hoplas off guard, but the rebel swung the opposite direction and soon reversed the brief advantage Martius thought they'd obtained with their dodge. Avorian fled up the side of a dune and then barreled hard over the peak to avoid the enemy's grasp.

The loyalist mount shimmied, throwing his scarred opponent briefly off his tail. Martius sheathed his sword and found the reins with both hands. He

yanked to pull Avorian toward their allied gryphons. He looked behind him and found Goras urging Hoplas after them. Martius's mind settled on a plan.

Avorian swung through the middle of the lesser mounts. This hindered Hoplas's pursuit. The loyalist then swung to the right and fell into pursuit of a rebel war beast.

This smaller gryphon was much slower and Avorian had surprise on his side. He dropped on the beast's hind quarters and the enemy gave a startled squawk and tried to dive away. The great gryphon lashed out, missed by a feather's width, but pushed the enemy far off course and out of the main duel.

Avorian floated to a hover and Martius took stock of Goras's position. The rebel leader rallied his air corps to a position in the north.

Martius pulled his mount to a higher altitude and held a fist aloft to call his own men closer to him as well. With a quick count, he confirmed that his flight was still at its full strength.

But that small victory soon blew away with the wind as he spotted a speck on his periphery. Clavius and Ptolemas flew in from the east with two rebels monitoring his path from the northern flank. The rider hadn't been able to sneak through. The air corps' distractions were not enough to get the message north.

Ptolemas came closer and Clavius needlessly relayed his failure with hand signals. Martius confirmed his understanding with a flick back and held up the only order he could next give to his flight.

We go again.

Clavius nodded and joined the formation. Martius focused back on the enemy side. Goras's corps waited, ready for another scrap.

Martius signed Marzio's name and pulled his hands apart and then angled an open hand due north. The indicated mount would replace Ptolemas and the air corps would give another try. He released Avorian and the loyalist air corps followed their leader and rushed forward to engage Goras and the rebels once more.

* * *

No luck.

Martius tried various tactics and pulled the rebels this way and that, but his crew never found a way through Goras's wall. By the early afternoon, Hoplas and Goras backed off and hovered in the enemy rear to monitor the fighting and still the Fifteenth couldn't get a gryphon by.

Martius retreated at this point and pulled his tired mounts—still largely uninjured, thankfully—away from the engagement. If Hoplas was allowed enough time to rest and return to full strength, Avorian would be at a severe disadvantage when they next locked talons.

Avorian touched down on the legion's landing strip a short while later and Martius found most of the gryphons from the other flanking party already present and waiting for him. The western flights had beaten the easterners back and Martius immediately saw one of their number was missing. A flash of hope flickered within his stomach.

“Anshas?”

His heartbeat quickened, the spark of victory souring to fear that the rider and gryphon had been killed or captured in the fighting. Dread and

hope were two sides of the same beam, and Martius now wobbled atop it.

Aristas stepped up and pointed to the north. “He hasn’t returned. I think he found a way past, but...”

Martius nodded his understanding as the rider’s voice trailed away. “We can’t know that for sure. He could’ve been taken down and captured.”

There was a rustle of wings as Gaius and Volgus touched down. The other gryphons shifted in their stances, both anxious and exhausted. Avorian gazed longingly toward the food troughs. Martius would relay the news to the general if he hadn’t already been briefed. He would portray the events as hopeful, optimistic that Anshas was heading north and that Basilas would soon be on the way to assist the main army.

Martius smiled despite himself. Were their positions reversed, Anshas would voice the exact opposite opinion.

With a glance north, Martius saluted General Gaius. Ponderas and his rider had gotten through. The entire legion’s hope for survival rested on their wings.

Chapter 14

First Company had been productive in the long days anticipating the enemy's appearance or for word to arrive from Gaius. Basilas stayed strong in his patience, but now he finally felt his restlessness creep toward overwhelmingness.

There had been no messages from the main army. Not even a gryphon messenger to relay that the legion had made it safely into the garrison of the city. If no rider appeared on the horizon by tomorrow evening, Basilas would strike south on his own, Gaius's campaign plans be damned.

He stared up the river and watched the light grow across the flat expanse of desert. The Gura flowed on his right and trickled apart into a delta before striking the great sea. His legion's fortifications were strong with trenches and reinforced walls, but there was nothing for them to ward off. There was no enemy to fight here.

Movement flickered, but not in the direction that Basilas desired. From the west came the morning scouting flight of a single gryphon. Leos and Archus landed with a thud just behind the prima captain and Basilas waited in silence for the rider to dismount and approach for the report.

"Morning, sir," Archus said. "Nothing in the west. No movement, but —"

The air captain froze, suddenly tense. Basilas raised an eyebrow. Behind the rider, the mount Leos held his head tall and eyes fixed on the southern sky.

“Something on the horizon.” Archus blinked and twitched out of his stupor. Basilas wished he could see through Leos’s eyes like the air captain could, but he’d soon get a description of what was approaching. “It’s Ponderas, sir.”

Basilas exhaled and his shoulders slumped as if a heavy breastplate had just been lifted from him. He stretched his eyes to where the gryphon stared but could see nothing yet. He waited.

Just as he thought he spotted the approaching speck, Leos relayed a new development.

“Multiple mounts, sir.” Archus furrowed his brow. “The rear group is chasing the first mount.”

The prima captain could only come to one conclusion for where the other mounts would come from.

“To your war beast, Air Captain.” Basilas pointed but kept his eyes on the south. Gaius wouldn’t send more than a single mount away from Gura. “Mount up and be ready. Send word to Bagoas as well.”

Archus bolted away without another word and Basilas at last spotted the multiple specks on the horizon flying in fast. The lead dot was lower than the others, struggling to stay steady. The chase swept closer and Basilas reached down to grip the hilt of Pothos.

He could make out the clear differences between the two sides. There were two enemies chasing the struggling lead, who drifted lower and lower to the sandy ground.

Behind Basilas came the snap of Leos taking off. Sand kicked up in a whirlwind. A screech from back in the rear was followed quickly by a horn heralding the company to action. The approaching gryphons were already close.

Basilas stood alone with his boots locked to the sand as the flight rushed onto his position. The mounts became clear to his human eyes. Anshas clung to Ponderas's back. The loyalist's wings were slow and heavy. Her head hung low out in front of her body.

Two gryphons pursued her. They were foreign to the prima captain. As Basilas watched, they switched positions in their formation and the new leader powered forward for the last stretch of the chase. They weren't going to catch their prey before the target landing, but where would Ponderas run when she touched down?

There was a crack and then a blur that passed low over Basilas's head from the other direction. Leos powered past Ponderas's lagging approach and barreled into the gap between the rebel wingmen. The enemies broke apart, but the lead held his focus on the messenger.

Basilas drew his sword. His boots still hadn't moved. He didn't need to look behind him to confirm that he was alone as an enemy gryphon bore down on his position. He held Pothos up and waved the short blade, a futile distraction against the war beast's focus.

Ponderas's wings buckled and finally faltered and she slammed into the sand just to the right of the first spear. The gryphon skidded across the sand and her rider tumbled over his head to land in a heap. Basilas focused on the enemy tail.

The beast dropped and skimmed along the sand for the final stretch of the approach. The prima captain took a breath and held it. He could see the mount's dark eyes and its beak open and sharp and its flexing talons.

Basilas exhaled, the action only halfway completing before the gryphon reached him.

He rolled, throwing himself to the left and ducking under a wing. He avoided the bulk of the beast, but the wind behind the attack pushed him off balance. Claws scraped across the sand as the gryphon landed and tried to slow after the surprise of missing his target.

Basilas staggered to his feet. The enemy was torn between two paths. The beast's head darted to the prima captain but then looked at Ponderas and Anshas on the ground to the west. He cawed a taunting note at the first spear and then bounded at the downed war mount.

First Company's reserves finally mobilized and Phalas, the other gryphon assigned to Basilas's group, swept out of the sky and pounced on the grounded rebel. Basilas had to dive out of the way again as the war beasts careened through his position.

A heavy blow struck Basilas during his roll. He was thrown to his back with a jarring thud. He quickly kicked himself to his feet and regripped Pothos. Phalas and the rebel broke from their dust cloud and rose to the sky, talons slashing at each other. Basilas ran the other direction, toward Ponderas and Anshas.

As he approached the downed gryphon, a screech cracked above him. Basilas slid, knocking into the side of Ponderas as the air wake of the attacking enemy snapped over them. Leos was tight on the rebel's tail and banked to shield his allies from another attack. The air cleared and Basilas crawled to Anshas.

The prima captain coughed through the dust and the rider stirred. Basilas helped turn him over and quickly checked for injuries. Ponderas, finally awakening, shook her head roughly as she staggered to her feet nearby.

“Uprising,” Anshas said through multiple coughs and gritted teeth. “Gura has rebelled. We made it out of the city, but Zagros was waiting.”

It took Basilas a moment to understand the rider’s words. He’d expected news of the rebels and to hear that Gaius was marching after the enemy. But an uprising from the Gurians? What did they have to do with anything?

Then the prima captain’s dread caught up, quickly to be overwhelmed by guilt. The rest of the legion struggled for its life while he and his company sat up here doing nothing.

The rebel gryphons still circled overhead. Screeching and war horns snapped Basilas out of his stupor. They were all in danger.

A talon formation clattered out of camp toward his position. The first spear needed to give orders and escort Anshas to safety and then help push the rebels in the sky away. There could be more of the enemies coming, even a ground contingent.

Ponderas staggered over to her rider. Basilas hauled Anshas to his feet. He stooped and lifted the rider on his shoulders to lay him across the saddle.

The gryphon trotted steadily toward the approaching talons and Basilas followed, glancing back at the sky behind them. The rebels would surely dive on the vulnerable gryphon if given the opening.

But Phalas and Leos did well in their duels and sacrificed altitude and air position in order to push the rebels away. Basilas’s contingent was fresh, whereas the rebels had been flying all night.

Just as the prima captain allowed himself to believe they were safe, a rebel broke from the duels and gave a desperate lunging dive. The beast attacked at a steep angle, reached ground level, and then swept across the allied rear. He swiped at Ponderas’s hindquarters. Basilas and the gryphon separated, rolling out of the way, Anshas flying off his mount.

The rebel flew off kilter with his miss, scraping the desert floor before fighting back for altitude. Javelins from the infantry talon forced him farther away as Basilas ran to Anshas once more. The air captain groaned

“Ugh.” Anshas hacked up more coughs. “Don’t do that again.”

Basilas lifted him back to the saddle despite his moans and complaints. Ponderas resumed her trotting, this time at a quicker pace.

They reached the vanguard talon. The legionnaires spread and engulfed the gryphon. A shield wall meshed facing south, but the formation would do little to fend off another gryphon attack. Basilas pushed through the men and shouted out orders.

“Javelins ready!”

The backline dropped their shields and drew out throwing spears.

But the rebel gryphons pulled back. They’d missed their chance at taking down the loyalist messenger. Now they faced a full contingent of infantrymen and two fresh and angry mounts in the sky.

Basilas heaved out a breath and returned Pothos to its sheath. None of the legionnaires around him relaxed. They watched the two rebels carefully.

The enemies broke away to the west and south. The allied gryphons screened them but didn’t overextend. Basilas had been looking for a scrap with the rebels. He’d been hoping for a fight. But now that he knew the truth of the war—a Gurian uprising and Zagros’s trap—he felt sick to his stomach.

“About-face!” Basilas pointed the group back to the camp. With a clenched fist, he beat against his other palm twice in frustration. “Get Anshas and Ponderas to the healers and secure our perimeter.”

The formation obeyed and the mounts pulled back in the air as well. It was only as they entered the camp that Basilas realized his sword arm

shoulder was throbbing. He must've injured it when evading one of the gryphons. He pressed around the muscle and against the bone with his free hand. Pain flared, nothing unbearable. He would survive.

And the prima captain had larger worries at the moment.

Basilas stepped out of the mass of infantry and pointed healers toward Anshas and Ponderas. The company engineers were already breaking down the camp structures. The prima captain watched Anshas as the men carried him away and then launched into further orders for his company to prepare to march.

* * *

It took longer than Basilas wanted to get Anshas settled and in a place where the rider could talk again. The healers fussed over him and pushed the prima captain away and Basilas had to content himself with organizing his talons as the camp was deconstructed and his men lined up for their march through the desert.

When at last he was able to talk to the air captain, he received the full story. Basilas had minimal questions, but his last was perhaps the most important to their present situation.

“You can travel, what about Ponderas?”

Anshas lay on a gurney but hauled himself up on one forearm with a wince, clutching at his ribs. His eyes flickered as the man checked on his mount.

“She can fly.” He nodded through another grimace.

“Good,” Basilas said. “She’s a strong mount. Fine job getting to us, I know that wasn’t an easy flight.”

Anshas coughed again. “I’m as surprised as you are that we made it. Never thought we could.”

Basilas grinned for the first time in untold days. “Rest. You can march when you’re ready.”

The prima captain exited the healing area and went to check on the columns of his various talons. He calculated how long it would take them to march to Gura at full pace. As he looked up to the sky, he realized the day was already half gone. He put his head down and pressed onward.

Chapter 15

The door slammed shut and the bang echoed throughout the library. Talia waited for Verstappas to latch the door behind him and walk to the table. The guard spoke as he reached the gathering.

“Pythias is still prying.” The Scipian collapsed into his seat. His posture sagged, though his frame was still hulking within the chair. Talia tried to remember if she’d ever seen the guard fatigued, let alone slouched into a backrest.

Halys, newly arrived and welcomed by the empress, was a warrior, though lithe and long where the guard was broad. By comparison, Solos appeared as if a soft wind could blow him over and Talia might as well as have been a twig underfoot.

They made a strange gathering, but this was Talia’s empire.

“The senate guard keeps asking about our Aptorians and their rotations and where we need help throughout the palace,” Verstappas continued. “I don’t like it, Princess.”

“Empress,” Halys cut in.

Her words corrected Verstappas, but Talia noted the Tyrhian’s glare was a shade softer for the Aptorian. The captain only ever looked that way at a ship with a strong hull and tall mast.

Blinking away this distraction to focus on more pressing matters, Talia pushed the conversation forward. “It’s okay, Halys. Verstappas has known me for a long time.”

“Apologies, Empress,” the bodyguard said. “Part of me will always think of you as a princess.”

Talia was still watching Halys and a fleeting color flickered beneath her normally pale cheeks at these words from Verstappas. The moment was broken by Solos clearing his throat. The stable master leaned forward and nearly lost his balance on his chair and slammed his hands onto the table for support, startling the others.

“Excuse me.” The stable master gave an embarrassed cough. “As I was saying before, I feel Oxus is an important part of us solidifying the palace.”

“But you don’t know where he is,” Halys said. She shot a glare at Solos, her normal austerity returning in full.

“We don’t know where each gryphon goes when he mourns,” Verstappas said.

“He’s not mourning, he was stolen. He...” Talia’s words trailed away. Her brother’s actions still haunted her.

Thankfully, Halys continued the conversation by focusing on Solos.

“You speak of theories, of things in your books.” The Tyrhian waved a hand dismissively at the stacks around them. This library close to the gryphon tower had become their sanctuary away from the prying ears of the rest of the Imperial Council. “Where would this gryphon go to deal with his loss?”

“Or where would Paulus take him to hide?” Verstappas added.

All heads of the table focused on Solos. The stable master leaned back in his chair, jumped when it creaked underneath him in fear of falling again, and then gripped his chin with one hand in thought.

The silence stretched on. Talia was patient, as was Verstappas, but the empress sensed Halys twitching toward a breaking point. Solis moved

before anything could explode.

He blinked, dropping his hand. He looked around at each of them in turn.

“I’m sorry, what was the question?” He pursed his lips and made a smacking sound under wide eyes.

Halys pushed back from the table with a loud huff. Verstappas shook his head.

“Where do you think Paulus and Oqus have gone?” Talia asked. “We want to find them.”

“Oh.” Solos rubbed at his eyes. “He’s probably…”

The stable master sat up straight, his face bright and eyes wide. His mouth hung open, words trailing away. He held one finger up by the side of his head.

“I’ll be back in a few days,” he said after another moment.

Solos stood and rushed to the door without another word.

Everyone who remained at the table stared at each other with raised eyebrows. Talia gaped at the door as it closed behind the disappeared stable master.

“Is he always that way?” Halys said. She looked as if she wanted to storm off, too, except it meant following Solos.

“Yes,” Verstappas said.

“It’s best to let him do whatever it is he does,” Talia said.

“He doesn’t seem to help much.” Halys shrugged.

“No,” Verstappas said. “But every once in a while he proves valuable.”

“Like bringing you here on gryphon back,” Talia said.

Halys tilted her head to the side. Then she nodded in agreement.

“I’ll keep an eye on Pythias and the senate guard, Your Highness.” Verstappas clasped his large hands together. “But I think now we need to continue our discussion on reinforcing Gaius.”

“Certainly. What is our best option?” Talia asked.

The council meeting earlier that day had ended in a contentious discussion on how to reinforce the Fifteenth Legion fighting against Zagros. Ecbas and the other senate representatives, the Vasili patriarch loudest of all, had argued against sending another legion south. Talia listened to their arguments but held on a decision, waiting to discuss details in private with her trusted circle.

“There is never harm in sending more force against an opponent,” Halys said.

“Unless Belgadan politics are involved,” Verstappas said.

The bodyguard’s face remained passive and unyielding with this comment. Halys raised an eyebrow in Talia’s direction. The Scipian faced the empress as well. This was a test to show whether she knew her empire’s inner workings.

“Because the legion in question is the Seventh and the leader of said legion is a general with the last name Vasili.” Talia pointed at Halys to drive her next point home. “The man in the council this morning that was red-faced and blubbing at the thought of sending that army south? That was the general’s father.”

“He doesn’t want glory for his son?” Halys looked between them both.

Verstappas gave a sigh. “Sending that legion would put it under General Gaius, a higher-ranked commander. It’s effectively demoting the Vasili boy.”

Halys stuck out her lower jaw.

“But,” Talia said and then paused for a thought to develop. “The numbers would be valuable and we haven’t had an update in the fight against Zagros. Even if Gaius is winning, it will take long to quell the disorder left by this war.”

“It will.” Verstappas nodded.

“Then we order them south and they assimilate with the Fifteenth to provide full strength against our greatest threat,” Talia said.

Halys smiled, shrugging as if the decision should’ve been made hours ago. She then clapped her hands together. “I like how much power you have in this place. Were my island like this, we’d have conquered the world.”

Talia smiled. The memory of Captain Halys arguing with her father, the landed king of the Tyrhian people, flashed before her eyes. That was a different style of politics.

“Anything else, Verstappas?” The empress stood up.

“No,” the guard said as he rose to join her. “I’ll go talk to my Aptorians and see if we can shadow Pythias’s men. I don’t like his scheming or the way Ecbas has been handling Bardylis’s trial.”

“I don’t like much about anything currently,” Talia said, eyes on the ground.

The meeting ended on that dour note. Verstappas left, off on his mission he’d stated and whatever other training he needed to do. His fatigue had seemingly blown away like leaves in autumn. That left Talia and Halys alone to continue catching up on their lost time.

“You’re doing well, Princess.”

“Empress,” Talia corrected.

Halys started but then spotted Talia’s grin. “I’m the same as your giant of a guard. It’s going to take a while to get used to your title.”

“For me as well,” Talia said. She was glad to have her friend here. Her arrival had been a large, but pleasant surprise. The other advisors had been shocked as well. Talia had welcomed another foreigner into her inner circle.

The empress left the library and traveled down a flight of stairs just outside the door. Halys followed her and soon they stepped out on the garden terrace with peaceful pecan trees and memories of simpler times collapsing into rebellion.

This was the terrace where they’d made their escape the night of the rebel attacks. Captain Martius, Avorian, and Axias had saved them. Her father had still been alive, but already struck by the poison blades.

There were flowers still in pots lined underneath the pecan grove. They’d been tended carefully by Titus as his distraction from the stresses of power. Talia had attempted diligence in keeping up with them, but she’d inherited nothing of her father’s skill and passion for the various-colored petals.

Most of the plants were withered and drooping, just like Talia’s empire.

“These plants are dying,” Halys said from behind Talia. The words did nothing to improve her mood.

“Do you have any skill at gardening?” Talia kept her eyes on the blotches of sky through the trees.

“None.” Halys stepped up beside her. Her head towered over the empress’s own.

“What is the Tyrhian word for botanist?” Talia needed a distraction.

“Does that mean flower grower? There isn’t one, I don’t think.” Halys shrugged her muscular shoulders. “We called everyone servant—*crux*—in the fortress.”

Talia could still picture the hanging vines and moss growing on the wet walls of the cave that formed the Tyrhian fortress. She was also fond of the two friends' conversations and lessons around the Tyrhian language. There was always a translation missing to the Tyrhian side that was curious to the Belgadan empress.

But the worries of her empire and the dangers to her imperial person soon came rushing back. There was no escaping their flow, their pull in the downward direction. She sighed and gave in to the dour sensation.

Ruling was impossible. Every noble house wanted more power. Every legion needed to be looked after and all the borders held enemies shrouded in darkness and scheming against the great Belgadan cause.

The Infinities twisted. Talia felt more and more tangled within their powerful embrace with each passing day.

Tomorrow, Verstappas would assist Talia in relaying her decision to send the Seventh Legion to Gaius's aid. The Vasili on the council—Talia still didn't know his full name—and his allies would rage and there would be an argument to fight through. Talia made more enemies than allies by quelling the rebellion that threatened her throne.

Halys had commented on Talia's power earlier. But most days the empress didn't feel in control. In truth, she held no power at all. She expected a knife in the dark against her or for an uprising to begin here in Belgada and take away her throne.

"Waiting is difficult," Halys said. "Half of sailing in a fleet is days of nothingness as you push across the ocean. But then action comes and you must be ready and willing to take the plunge and tack into the enemy's guard."

A ship metaphor didn't help Talia.

“I’m not a warrior like you.”

“But you have warriors fighting for you.” Halys spoke over Talia. “Your shield-wielding guard is worth ten men by himself, even without a spear. You have numerous legions at your disposal. You’re a good leader, Princess. When the time comes, you’ll take the right action.”

Talia gave a stiff nod to show Halys she’d heard her but then turned her eyes skyward once more. Axias approached and circled down through the clouds into a landing path for the terrace. The empress needed a ride and hoped the cool wind of higher altitude would clear her head.

“Care for a flight?” Talia asked the Tyrhian as Axias landed and trotted up to them.

Halys shook her head. “No. One long flight is enough for me. My legs are still stiff from the trip with Solos.”

“Suit yourself.” Talia swung up in the saddle. The image of the Tyrhian sailor holding tight on one of Solos’s gryphons, eyes wide with terror, made her smile. Axias tilted her head at Halys and then kicked into the sky.

The majority of Talia’s worries receded as the wind picked up to a howl and its frigid embrace engulfed her body. Axias was warm and she bent low over the saddle as they powered into the sun and billowing clouds.

There was no destination. There was nowhere to go. Only things to escape and the rush of flight to experience.

The imperial gryphon broke south from the city and soon brought them over the royal burial fields. Talia leaned over the saddle and stared down at the rolling hills of wildflowers. There was no marker for her father or any of the dead imperial heroes, though she thought she remembered the area where he’d been laid to rest.

She took in the expanse of colors and fought off moisture welling behind her eyes. Then they were past and on to endless farm fields cut into squares across the landscape. The grain shortage had eased, but the city stores were still worryingly low. Another worry to clog Talia's mind.

Harvest was in full swing across most of the fields below her and the common folks tilled the land to keep the empire running. Talia remembered the little farm girl she'd seen earlier. The empress's role was to protect that girl, the farmers and workers.

The weight of that responsibility gripped her tighter and the cold air stung her damp face. Everything was too much to bear. Without the help of Axias and her friends, Talia didn't think she could handle it.

"How could you leave me like this?" Talia said with a glance back to the imperial flower fields. Her words ripped off on the wind and were lost. No answer would ever come back in reply.

* * *

Axias took her time drifting back to the city. She angled to the top of the palace and set her wings to a slow guide and Talia enjoyed the last bits of freedom and flowing air outside of the oppressiveness of her home. After touching down in the gryphon tower, her problems came rushing back to the fore.

The stable master Solos was gone. Talia noticed he'd taken Drocas for a flight, presumably to search for Oxus. He would probably be gone a few

days at least and return with minimal information that wouldn't help in the slightest.

His absence made Talia feel more alone. One of her allies had left the palace and only Verstappas and Halys remained.

Voices drifted up from the pool on the terrace below as Talia worked through dressing down Axias. She was lost in the work, relishing the last bits of distraction before returning to her quarters and whatever tasks remained within the day.

But the tone of the men below gave her pause. She crept to the tower window and peered down. Three senate guards, garbed in their golden capes, walked the terrace. The gryphons of the imperial stable were huddled in the far corner away from them.

Talia had learned at a young age to always trust gryphon instincts.

Axias was stiff as well and peered around the empress with narrowed eyes. The empress's heart quickened as one of the senate guardsmen marched to the base of the tower.

Talia made her decision quickly. Axias was still saddled. She climbed aboard and Axias leaped out of the window into a dive silently around the back of the tower, unseen by the sneaking men.

They made for the pecan grove lower on the palace's façade and Talia tried to think through what was happening across her home. She felt like this grand place was now foreign to her. She controlled everything. She led the empire. But there were schemers in the shadows wherever she turned.

Her father hadn't managed to keep the evil at bay, how could she?

Talia was being paranoid, of course. With a deep exhale, she sat up straighter in the saddle as Axias drifted in to land among the shady pecan trees. Talia nearly chuckled out loud at herself. Martius's mount Avorian

loved this grove, and if the air captain were here to see her and how frightened she was, he'd think less of her. She wouldn't have that.

With a shake of her head, Talia waved off what she'd made of the guardsmen above and dismounted Axias to enter her palace and make her way to the safety of her quarters.

* * *

Verstappas waited in the shadows as the boots climbed the tower stairs. The empress hadn't seen him, although Axias would've sensed the guardsmen's presence had they stayed a little longer. Now the shield bearer's focus was fully on the suspicious guardsmen.

He'd pieced together a theory immediately after leaving his audience with Talia. Pythias, commander of the senate guard and holder of far too much power for his own small mind, had planted the idea for the eccentric stable master to search for Oxus. Solos had taken the bait and left immediately before Verstappas could discern the situation.

This was what the senate wanted. The gryphon tower was now clear of one of Talia's strongest allies. This was where part of Bardylis's rebels had struck first the night they attacked Titus and the Empire. Pythias would see the same opening for his own schemes.

Talia's decision earlier on the Seventh Legion was a step in the right direction, but she was still far too passive in her rule. The other council members would see that as weakness. All would be enterprising enough to drift toward planning a coup. This terrified the Aptorian commander.

The outline of a soldier pushed through the doorway to Verstappas's level. Everything was in shadow, the Scipian's stall most of all. The guardsmen went straight to Axias's stable. He only gave a cursory glance across the room and then left, all but confirming Verstappas's fears.

The senate guard, Pythias at their head, was up to something.

Chapter 16

“Spread the trench out wider, and dig deep.” Gaius dragged his finger to indicate east for his men. “Pull spikes in when you can, assuming they give us the time.”

“Yes, sir.”

It was good to hear confident affirmation from the leader of Second Company’s engineers, Sergeant Simus. But the response only made Gaius miss First Company further. Sergeant Atras would’ve remained silent, diligent and strong under Basilas’s command.

The general spoke to the larger contingent of officers pressed around him. “The demigryphs will have the right flank. Use the desert to your advantage and keep them from turning the field on us.”

Sergeant Nessa nodded her understanding. Her mount Phalos straightened behind her with pride at being given such a key task.

“Air cavalry is to remain in the sky,” Gaius continued, turning his eyes to Air Captain Martius. “Let’s monitor how their gryphons approach.”

“Aristas and Epicas are both scouting now, sir,” the rider said.

“I’ll hold Volgus in the center and keep him high. He and Avorian will give notice if Zagros tries something tricky.”

Gaius scanned across the gathering. One face stuck out like that of a child in a room full of elders. Captain Argos had been replaced immediately after his death, as was necessary in the middle of a campaign, but newly promoted Captain Megaras was plenty qualified, if a little young. Gaius

would've liked more time before putting him at the head of seven hundred men.

Generals were never given an easy choice before battle.

Gaius blinked and looked above his men, over their heads and back to the legion's defenses. The northern facing wall was strong and the gate had been reinforced with a moat dug across the northern width.

The forward defenses consisted of a trench stretching one hundred marching paces out on both eastern and western flanks. It would be completed by midmorning, per Gaius's latest orders. If Zagros wanted to attack them, he would have plenty of obstacles to get through first, not least of which were the hardened veterans of the Fifteenth Legion.

But the rebels would have a scheme planned and still held the upper hand in the sky with a larger air corps.

The biggest issue for the Fifteenth was what lay in their rear. Gaius had taken a high flight with Volgus over the city of Gura and found it still seething and on fire. Buildings burned. It seemed as if the populace was now fighting among themselves and turning the streets into angry anarchy.

The general would have to use a few of his talons to guard the southern wall of their camp. They were just out of catapult range of the city's walls, but if the Gurians wanted to attack at the same time as the rebels, then the Fifteenth would be in almost insurmountable trouble.

Gaius twisted up his mouth and chewed lightly on his tongue. He then forced his expression into a focused grimace. This was no place for a smile, but he didn't want to look worried either. He put as much confidence behind his eyes as possible and looked at each of his officers in turn.

"The Second has the van and will skirmish from here." Gaius stamped a boot in the sand to indicate where they all stood. "The Third and Fourth will

hold the trench line. If the enemy reaches that point, the gryphons will engage, as will artillery.”

“Yes, sir,” the engineer Sergeant Simus called out from the group. Gaius’s lips twitched up in a smile; the contrast with Sergeant Atras clear once again.

“We fall back to the camp walls only on my order. Hold the trench and maintain the flanks. Remember, if they’re attacking, it’s out of desperation. We hold a strong position and they have a slope to mount. We will hold.” Gaius emphasized the last three words. This was met with a round of nods and confident salutes.

The general pivoted and faced north. The rebels were already moving.

As if they’d been observing Gaius and waiting for this moment, war horns echoed across the arid landscape. Volgus flashed a view from high above to show the movement from the enemy camp.

Sand kicked up in the air and formed a dust cloud that built like a giant wave rushing to where the loyalists stood trapped. Specks broke out in the sky to the east and west and flew forward to converge back in the center.

Gaius didn’t startle or yell out further orders. All the soldiers not at work held their ground as well and watched the slow buildup of the enemy. The rebels were far away and it would take a force that size a long time to mobilize. The legion would wait and continue to prepare.

But the rebel’s gryphons weren’t slow and Volgus thrust forward to push away the middle prong of the enemy mounts. The great gryphon was joined by others from the allied air cavalry and they swung across in a defensive maneuver to parry away the aerial attacks. Gaius watched the whirling in the clear sky for a moment before he turned to his men and signaled them into a frenzy of movement.

The officers scattered. The captains of the grounded infantry went to their positions, demigryphs broke to the east, and Martius mounted Avorian.

But he didn't release the gryphon to the sky immediately. Avorian trotted closer to Gaius.

"Think Anshas got through?" the general asked.

Martius nodded, youthful exuberance and overconfidence shining through his eyes. "Certainly." He tilted his head to the north, indicating the rumble of enemy boots. "They wouldn't be attacking otherwise."

Gaius didn't contradict the rider. The enemies could've captured Anshas and tortured a full layout of the Fifteenth's camp from him. Zagros could've realized how outnumbered Gaius was and that the rebels could outflank the position.

But Martius seemed sure of himself. The air captain was usually cautious and worrisome. Gaius could take solace in his changed demeanor and hoped the majority of his soldiers held a similar state.

Gaius grinned at his lead air captain after working through his thoughts. "Take it to them."

Martius saluted and spurred Avorian into the sky. The general stood alone in what would soon be a killing field. Talons from Second Company marched up behind him. He was exposed out in front of his main force as the rebel wall of dust shifted closer.

This present weakness was a good reminder that Gaius was one man, no different from a common legionnaire. He could order men to their deaths to protect himself and the greater good of the empire. But he could still be cut down. A leader was only one man among many.

Emperor Titus had taught him that.

"Sir!"

Gaius turned at the call and found Captain Megaras beckoning him backward with frantic waving. The young officer was worried with the general so far forward as battle approached. Gaius lifted a hand and then pushed a message through his gryphon bond, calling Volgus back to him.

The great gryphon landed and slowed to a stop and Gaius jumped aboard. The general clicked his tongue behind clenched teeth. Volgus ruffled his head feathers, sensing his rider's unease. He launched and took them high over the position before setting his wings into a glide. The wind's howling dropped to a steady hum as they drifted over the landscape. Up ahead, the rebel gryphons circled and twisted among Gaius's own air cavalry. There weren't engaged in full duels yet. Each side felt out their opposite's strength and positioned for airspace.

Volgus angled into this skirmishing, but both rider and gryphon held their eyes elsewhere. Gaius looked over the order of march of Zagros's grounded force. It looked to be a full seven companies plus a contingent of grounded cavalry out on the enemy's left flank. They were in columns now but would form into the normal three lines of combat common across all Belgadan legions once they were closer.

The Fifteenth could stop this. They had earthworks and various other traps ready for the enemy. His men had the advantage of being able to sit and wait for the enemy to come to them, climbing up a slight hill, then having to traverse the difficult terrain created by Gaius's legionnaires.

He tightened his grip on Volgus's reins and lifted his teeth off their grinding against each other. He allowed himself to exhale. Volgus shifted his wings and dropped their altitude to match the level of the duels in front of them.

Gaius had seen enough. He was focused now and that brought confidence. His legion would hold.

He yanked on Volgus's reins and pulled the mount in a wide arc that brought them across the entire center-rear of the aerial duels. The general focused on the infantry and watched the first units of the advancing columns spread out and form their attacking lines.

Volgus swept them back over the Fifteenth's camp and Gaius allowed his gaze to return to his own legion. With a quick glance at Gura, he confirmed their gates were closed and there was no force of crazed locals sallying forth.

Second Company had formed up in the skirmishing line and the Third and Fourth stood like solid blocks with shields ready beyond the trench works. Volgus landed between the vanguard and main line. Captain Megaras stood ready. Gaius launched into orders based on what he'd observed above. He drew his sword and used it to point out the positions anyway.

"They came in a normal attack formation, three lines." Gaius pointed to either flank and tried to measure out about how wide he thought Zagros's attack points would be. The newly promoted captain nodded his understanding. "The initial attack will be heavy."

"We'll push them back." Megaras sounded like he fully believed the words. But he was delusional with adrenaline.

"No," Gaius said. "You're a skirmish line. That's a full legion marching toward you. Slow them down and break up the initial attack and then get back to the trench."

"Yes, sir."

Volgus took off again to monitor the enemy's advance and parry the rebel air cavalry with the other gryphons. Gaius marched backward to the main line. He took stock of the defenses.

The engineers hadn't completed the right flank trench, but it would have to do. The demigryphs were stationed there and could hopefully push off any speculative advances from Zagros's side.

Gaius dropped down into the central trench and flung himself up the other side before the sappers closed the final opening with additional spikes and piles of rubble. Graccus offered a hand to help the general over the lip. Standing, Gaius looked over at the good work of his sappers. He nodded at the rows of soldiers to either side of him.

"We hold here," he said, pointing at the dirt.

War cries echoed in response and swords beat against shields and the entire line rose into a cacophony of noise. A horn sounded from the camp walls. The piercing noise beckoned the enemy onward and the rebels answered with their own bugles.

Zagros's first notes were that of a normal Belgadan war horn, but then higher-pitched wails joined from the right. Gaius recalled the Sarissa messenger who'd asked for the parlay. The enemy would have Sarissa cavalry in addition to barbarian swordsmen within his ranks.

Sensing Gaius's realization, Volgus threw an image of the right flank the general's way. A Sarissa cavalry formation galloped across the sand. Sergeant Nessa's demigryphs would hold them off, but Gaius still used Volgus to pass along a suggestion to Avorian and the air cavalry to allocate more gryphons to that flank.

The wind shifted and blew into the face of the loyalists, bringing with it a wall of sand. Like ghosts of legend, the front ranks of the rebel legion

crept like shadows from the haze. They kept their march in order and calmly pushed into javelin range of Gaius's vanguard.

"Loose!"

The Second hurled their first volley and the spears tore into the shadows. The hazy ghosts became solid, shafts protruding from torsos. Rebels stumbled and fell and were replaced by further enemies. The sand kicked up into angry whirlwinds. Gryphons screamed overhead.

Martius's air cavalry struck at the enemy. Beaks and talons lashed out and the rebel mounts were shoved away once more. Volgus swooped over the proceedings and dived through the haze to strike at the infantry ranks.

The rebels finally released, charging. Belgadans clashed with their brothers. Legionnaires fought legionnaires. Second Company gave ground grudgingly. Gaius lost sight of the front lines from his position.

"Retreat," the general said under his breath.

The skirmishers began to break from their rear and trickled toward the trench line. A group of sappers to Gaius's left lowered a plank bridge and multiple others up and down the line dropped in similar fashion across the ditch. The flight of the Second, now in full force, converged on these with the rebels in tow.

More gryphons fell from the sky now as Martius unleashed the full might of the air cavalry. Explosions of men erupted as Volgus and Avorian and others tore through the center of Zagros's pursuers. The rebel front line shattered. The next wave swept into the gap.

Enemy gryphons dived as well and tried to fend off the attacking loyalist mounts. They succeeded in some places and the rebel rush compressed close on the Second's heels.

Gaius's eyes darted over the men scrambling across the trench. He waited as long as possible. Then he held up one arm and drew the eyes of the sappers and officers all along his line. The rebels hurtled forward and the air roared with gryphon wings. Not half of the Second was across the trench yet.

Gaius dropped his hand.

The signal meant death for the rear of the Second's retreat. But without pulling the bridges now, the entirety of the Fifteenth's defenses would fall apart. The sappers pulled a switch within the plank design to make the bridges collapse. A majority of the vanguard were safe, but many fell into the trench and were forced to crawl their way through the defensive spikes and rubble.

The entire rebel force closed behind them.

The enemy legionnaires didn't slow. Zagros would've seen the details of the defenses from the air long before ordering his men forward. The rebels were ready. They brought forth their own plank walkways with a crush of soldiers piling across the trench on their own as well.

The enemy's weight crashed on the trench like a flooding river. They were a torrent, sweeping into the ditch and swarming up the other side despite the spikes and piles of rocks. The remainder of the Second legionnaires were overrun.

"Artillery!" Gaius called. The order was repeated by his officers.

The terrifying snap of the ballistae lines preceded the screech of projectiles overhead and explosions within the rebel mass. Gaius had the pleasure of watching one bolt strike a group of rebel sappers carrying forward a plank bridge. The men and the makeshift bridge shattered all together into shrapnel of bodies and blood and sand.

But many of the other bridges reached their target and the rebels threw them down across the trench. Loyalists responded and tried to knock the crossings away, but the rebels darted forward and their swords clanged against the armor and shields of the defenders.

Javelins lashed over the ditch. Shield walls formed where the rebel planks took hold and the mass of enemies converged to each bottleneck. Gaius stepped to the edge and hacked down with his sword. There were numerous enemies already crawling over one another to get up to level ground. Even more scurried across bridges.

Gaius parried an optimistic attack from a rebel below him. An ally stuck a spear through the enemy's neck before the general could counter himself. The body rolled backward, taking the spear with him.

An arrow smacked into the allied spearman. Gaius reached out, but the soldier toppled too quickly and was out of reach. A strong hand gripped the back of the general's tunic and pulled him backward.

"Sarissa arrows, sir!" The voice and hand belonged to Captain Graccus. "You can't be at the front."

Gaius threw a glare at the officer but obeyed his suggestion. The general recalled the quiet before the battle. This moment was what he'd dwelt on. He would now move to the rear and let other Belgadans lay down their lives to protect their commander.

More arrows clattered and smacked and Gaius ducked as he was pushed through his men. More talons from the Third and Fourth pressed to plug holes as they appeared. When Gaius reached the rear and surveyed the field, it seemed the entire weight of multiple legions, instead of only one, poured against his men.

Volgus sent multiple images from the sky in the gap between his duels and attacking runs. The enemy gryphons struck fast and targeted the two great gryphons of the Fifteenth specifically. Volgus was under constant pressure but still monitored the battle as it developed for his rider.

Zagros massed almost the entirety of his force on the center. They flooded the trench and Gaius's lined bowed in defense. Above, gryphons twisted, locked talon to talon. On the right, the cavalry held their skirmish line and the flank remained clear.

Gaius made a snap decision. He passed orders to Volgus, who in turn would pass them to Avorian and Martius, instructing the lead air captain to break right and help hold the eastern flank. The rebel gryphons there could easily destroy the demigryph contingent if allowed to and the Sarissa cavalry would have a free run at Gaius's exposed side.

Satisfied with the state of the air battle, Gaius returned his attention to his infantry. A future unfurled itself within his mind.

The next move would bring Fifth Company forward as reinforcements. Zagros, in response, would break out wide and try to outflank the defenders with his larger force on either flank. Gaius would have to thin his line, but if he used the gryphons in the defense of the trench, they could keep the enemy bogged down and await the arrival of Basilas.

That future felt solid. Gaius blinked and returned to the present. The battlefield was bathed in blood and screams and sandy whirlwinds. With a quiet and grim huff, the general stepped forward and pointed his reinforcements forward with his sword and flung his legion into the next phase of the desperate battle.

Chapter 17

Avorian swooped over the battle as the vanguard retreated. The rebels charged like a rising, unstoppable tide. The trench-line loyalists waited for the enemy and braced for impact.

A bright day had turned overcast with the march of the rebels and enemy war beasts flickering all throughout the curtain of haze. Martius monitored the fighting and watched for any cunning attacks from the enemies in the air.

Goras and Hoplas were out there. The evil air captain would target Avorian and want to eliminate one of the loyalist great gryphons. Martius pressed low in the saddle and narrowed his eyes to tried to pierce the haze around him. The enemy mounts could be taken out as well, Hoplas included.

Avorian banked across the western flank and angled to carry back over the central fighting. His head swiveled, looking for enemies to engage. Volgus darted up from the loyalist rear and rolled into a dive against the rebel infantry.

Enemies exploded where he landed and he cut a canyon through their ranks just before the trench line. Swords and javelins lifted out of the loyalist ranks as they cheered the attack. Avorian longed to join in the carnage, but Martius sat up and held him in the air.

A hulking shadow ripped from the northern sand cloud. It shifted, blurring through the haze before forming two wings, a snarling beak, and

sharp, outstretched talons. Goras and Hoplas finally showed themselves. They flew directly for Avorian's flight path.

Martius leaned low again but gathered up the reins and yanked Avorian to the south. The gryphon obeyed and flew over the loyalist side of the battle. Goras came onward aggressively. Martius used that against him.

Other duels whirled past them as Hoplas settled into their air wake. Avorian hooked, curling his neck around to sight his enemy. They snaked to the eastern flank and then banked hard to the south and over the legion's camp position. The artillery and infantry on the ground focused on defending against the rebel ground rush. There would be no support from projectiles below them during this battle.

But Avorian had his air cavalry. The rebels still outnumbered the loyalists, but the Fifteenth air corps had less area to cover in defense. There was no more spreading out over a wide expanse. They could fight in support of one another.

The loyalists powered over the camp and then angled due north, moving back to the fighting at the trench. Volgus lifted from another raking run through the enemy infantry. He climbed straight, flying past them to reach a height above Avorian's flight path. The war beast floated at his apex, wings wide, feathers spread.

Then Volgus dropped his head and tilted his body down and cupped into a dive. Avorian held his path and Hoplas was oblivious to the new danger. Finally sensing the surprise attack at the last moment, the rebel fell off his pursuit with a jolt. Hoplas broke right to fling himself out of the way and Volgus careened past him.

Avorian slowed and turned, hoping to fall in behind the rebel and take him down. But Hoplas retreated to the enemy side. The loyalists weren't

quick enough.

Avorian pulled up to a hover and watched Hoplas flee. Volgus rose on their left and flapped in an observation position.

Cracks from the ballistae firing resounded up the battle line below. The bolts flung over the loyalist defenders and smashed through the rebel ranks beyond the trench. Each new cut from the artillery was filled in with more rebels and the loyalist line only bowed more and more from the center.

Martius blinked as Avorian checked on the lesser mounts under his command. Everyone was in a duel of their own strewn across the battle. Volgus and Avorian could make a large difference by attacking the grounded troops.

But then new orders came from their left, relayed through Volgus hovering nearby. The rider turned his head and looked at the empty saddle on Volgus's back. Gaius contacted them.

Break east, the communication said. Support the right flank.

The instructions didn't come with those explicit words. They were more a feeling, a direction indicated by an unseen finger point. The communication among the gryphons was difficult to explain unless someone felt the sensation of a bond themselves. Avorian's thoughts were Martius's and vice versa.

Gaius's intent was clear. Martius only took one more fleeting look at the rebel infantry on their attack push and then pulled Avorian to the east. Volgus sent a caw after them before darting the other direction. The general's gryphon would support the aerial duels while Avorian ensured the legion's fragile flank held.

Leaning over the saddle, Martius took stock of the right flank as it approached. A banner from Third Company hung behind the trench and

was supported by talons from the Fourth. Their main defensive line held, but the rebels trickled wider and would soon engulf them as Zagros committed more numbers.

The only thing that held the enemy back was the space on the far flank where grounded cavalry could hit them in the rear if they were too aggressive. That was supposed to be Nessa's demigryphs, but they were preoccupied at the moment.

A mass of horses wheeled in a long arc to the northeast. These mounts were gray and the men on their back wore what looked like patchwork cloaks of brown and green and wielded spears above their heads or short bows pulled back and at the ready.

The mass split and attacked south. In the middle of their new path galloped the legion's demigryphs, moving across an increasingly shaky position.

Avorian angled immediately into a dive and focused on the left flank. The Sarissa cavalry pressed hard and sought to hit the loyalists on both sides at one time with their superior numbers. About two talons' worth of rebel infantry rushed up in the rear to support as well. The enemy was making a strong push to take this flank. They knew, as Gaius had clearly realized, that if the eastern side of the defenses fell, the legion's camp could be easily surrounded.

Avorian had a full view of the situation. It was now time to fight.

The war beast dropped his claws and twisted at the end of his dive to rake along the inner edge of the Sarissa attack. The horses scattered, but many tripped over each other and were ripped off their gallop by Avorian's claws and piled up, all twisted together.

The gryphon lifted and executed a tight turn and Martius was nearly flung off by the maneuver. Before the rider could recover, Avorian plummeted again and hit the other flank of the enemy cavalry, forcing the horses away from Nessa's position.

The war mount pulled out of this second pass and found the Sarissa wheeling to reconvene in the north. But the rebel infantry support would push soon.

Martius spotted four lesser gryphons in the sky, weaving through the dust cloud. The two loyalist mounts were Ptolemas and Marzio, both pursued closely by rebels. Below, Nessa navigated a small retreat and gained space to maneuver.

Ptolemas climbed away from his pursuer nearby. Martius snapped his reins to send Avorian after them.

They attacked the rebel mount from the right of the lesser beast and broke off his chase at once. The enemy dived low to his cavalry allies and the protection of their bows.

The other rebel gryphon was closing in on Marzio's tail at a low altitude. Avorian spun to break on this target as well. The rebel was catching his ally.

A volley of arrows shot from the horses below as Marzio sought to maneuver away. The bolts missed, arcing just below his altitude, but reminded the aerial mounts there was danger on all sides. Avorian flapped harder and stretched his neck out, willing himself faster. The rebel gryphon reached out his claws and stretched for Marzio's rear.

Martius's mount screeched, catching the attention of the rebel mount at the last. The enemy buckled at the sight of a great gryphon's approach. Marzio used the faltering to spin away and gain much-needed altitude.

Avorian swiped against the flank of the rebel and missed as it dived away. The great gryphon kicked with his hind legs blindly but finding contact to send the enemy flipping to the north. The loyalist then banked around to support his wing-gryphons as they resumed position over the demigryphs and recovered.

Avorian's victory was short-lived. New rebel war beasts were already gathering over the Sarissa cavalry. The enemy had committed more of their air corps to the side of the attack, sensing its importance the same as Gaius.

The demigryphs still held with the Sarissa horses resuming their aggression. Multiple formations wheeled in circles and fired arrows at the loyalist mounts and then pulled back only to attack from another angle moments later.

The loyalists were losing ground. They fled from the arrows and the wheeling horses and the enemy gladly took the space vacated. Martius glanced to the west and spotted the edge of the trench line. Third Company was holding, but their flanks were close to exposed.

The loyalists needed more men and gryphons.

Martius relayed this thought to Avorian and the great gryphon understood. The war beast waited a moment longer and then, with reluctance, sent a status of the slowly failing flank to Volgus back in the center of the army.

Then they refocused. Both rider and gryphon stared at the formation of four rebel gryphons now opposite them. Ptolemas and Marzio hovered on Avorian's flanks.

Martius knew Avorian was worth more than two lesser mounts by himself and didn't feel outnumbered. But they wouldn't throw this aerial

force away easily and they couldn't duel in the air and support Nessa below. The flank depended on them, though. They would have to find a way.

The rider flicked his reins and let Avorian charge.

* * *

Arrow after arrow smacked into the shield barrier raised to protect Gaius.

It was clear that Zagros had ordered the Sarissa archers to aim for officers on the loyalist side. That made Gaius's plumed helmet and the signal corps that clung to his tail a clear target. In response, the legion's rear talons stacked their shields and presented a wall to protect their general.

Another arrow bit into the wood of the barrier with a crack. Every once in a while a ping would sound out as a bolt struck the metal engraving of the dueling infinities across the shields. Gaius did his best to ignore the distractions.

He stuck his head out and surveyed his western flank. Visibility was poor. He was constrained by his lack of movement behind the line. Reports came in from his officers. Gaius tried to keep ahold of everything and all the moving pieces. He had Volgus continuously sending him images of the fighting from the sky, but the attack had devolved into a mass of men and it was difficult to garner a true status even from the air.

"Send the rest of the Fifth to the west. Captain Barnas can use them where he needs." Gaius opened his mouth to go on and order further talons to the eastern flank as well, but Volgus interrupted him.

The mount brought news from Air Captain Martius and Avorian. A blurred view of the demigryphs almost surrounded by Sarissa and Martius fighting against multiple gryphons on the back of Avorian flashed for the general.

The east wasn't going to hold much longer.

Legionnaires in the center had done well in pushing back much of Zagros's main attack. The air cavalry, with Volgus helping them, held their own above in the sky as well.

But the position was still tenuous.

The Sarissa contingent created the chorus of arrows smacking against Gaius's shield barrier. They also fielded the horses galloping circles around the legion's demigryphs in the east. Those mercenaries were the difference this day.

"Stay that order," Gaius said. He held out a hand to keep the messenger from sprinting away to the Fifth's location.

An arrowhead punched through a shield and gashed a legionnaire's arm. The man grunted and held in his scream and kept his part of the barrier steady.

Trumpets blew from the rebel side as they rallied for further aggression. All noise was a distraction. Gaius fought to gather his thoughts. There was no other path here for him.

With a shake of his head, the general relayed new orders.

"Sound the horn to fall back," he said. "The center clears first and we hold the flanks. The gryphons can cover us, but there won't be much time."

Messengers scattered to the other command posts. Loyalist horns bugled out long notes, calling the retreat. The noise would spur the rebels into a furor from a perceived victory.

The Fifteenth had been in perpetual retreat for days. Gura first. Now from the trench defenses. The walls of their camp position would offer some respite from the violence of the rebels. But then from there, the men of Gaius's legion would have to survive another night surrounded by seething enemies of the empire.

Chapter 18

The call came via Volgus for the legion to retreat. That included Martius and Avorian on the left flank and the demigryphs skirmishing below them. The rider understood the order. Rebels were everywhere. The enemy would eventually find a breakthrough and encircle at least part of the general's force. Gaius had no choice.

Avorian's chest heaved with a sigh. Martius shook his head while grinding his teeth with the same frustration. Both wanted to keep fighting. Horns sounded out the orders across the battlefield a moment later. Signal flags lifted from the central fighting, pointing toward the grounded cavalry skirmishing. Martius flicked hand signs to his wingmen in the sky. The air corps would screen the fighting retreat.

A rebel gryphon ripped in from the north. The beast came in high, seeking to use the advantage of speed and altitude, but Avorian simply rolled to the side and let him barrel past them. The lesser beast flailed as his perceived victory evaporated and he nearly careened into the ground.

Avorian ignored the attacker and wheeled around and pushed west. Ptolemas and Marzio flew up behind them and clung to Avorian's air wake. Martius glanced to the center where the rear of the Fifteenth already rolled back toward the camp position. Nessa's demigryphs fled west instead of south. The grounded mounts drew the Sarissa enemy horses away from the main retreat.

The enemy gryphons shadowed Avorian's path back to the center, leaving the grounded cavalry open to maneuver freely. With a nod, Martius snapped Avorian's reins to fly faster.

As if in direct response, a flight of enemy gryphons with Hoplas and Naxos at their head barreled in from the north. The rider Goras pointed his sword at Martius and broke formation. The rebels sensed a victory.

Martius released the reins and his formation dived for the ground. One other rebel followed Hoplas. Naxos held altitude and powered over the main fighting in search of Volgus.

Dust swirled and still made visibility hazy. Infantry rolled through their retreating run below, kicking up walls of sand. Rebel legionnaires surged over the former trench line and converged at the center.

Martius lowered himself over Avorian's neck, pushing thoughts of the ground fighting to the side. They pulled up from their dive and barreled southwest. Hoplas gained on them. Ptolemas and Marzio still clung to Avorian's tail. The lesser gryphons couldn't keep up forever.

Martius flicked a hand showing two fingers split wide behind him. Clavius and Epicas both nodded on their mounts and then broke to either flank. Avorian accelerated into the swirling dust.

Hoplas's own wing-gryphon darted to the left, following Epicas. Martius twisted his head around to find Goras still tight on them. Their duel rushed at an even greater speed over the western wall of the loyalist camp.

Martius pulled Avorian around the southern edge and sought to angle them back over the main retreat. The air corps needed to dive against the rebel infantry to slow their pursuit. Flying circles in the sky against Goras's air corps wasn't productive.

Avorian bobbed his head. The gryphon agreed. He set his neck straight and fell into evasive maneuvers.

They zagged in the air, the war beast tossing his body left and then right and then left again. Martius rolled with the movement of his mount's torso. They banked straight over the camp position and dropped low over the gate. Hoplas held on to his pursuit.

The rebel war beast was slightly bigger than Avorian and had trouble with the tight turns. But he gained on them somehow with each great flap of his wings.

The duel blew over the retreat like a whirlwind, Avorian's claws itching to rip through the chasing rebels so close below them. Instead, he hooked upward, executing a vertical climb. They lost speed. Hoplas closed. The bright sky gleamed through a gap in the clouds directly in Martius's eyes.

But the glare would hinder Hoplas's vision just as much. He couldn't see the shadow slinging in on his right flank.

Ptolemas, having completed a rotation around the camp after leaving Avorian's wake, cut across Hoplas's rear. The enemy only sensed the attack at the last moment and swung his hind quarters up and away. He evaded everything but one talon, but that was enough space for Avorian.

The loyalist great gryphon rolled, pivoting back to a dive. They flipped upside down in an arc, glaring sun evaporating from Martius's eyes, and hurtled back to the ground.

Hoplas had righted himself and now fled back to the rebel side. Avorian let him go. Ptolemas gave a gleeful screech as he and Clavius circled and then joined the dive. Martius gave a nod when he met the rider's eye. They then broke apart and smashed in opposite directions through a swath of rebel infantry.

The rebels here bunched together in a crush as they eagerly chased Gaius's retreat. They made a perfect target for Avorian's claws.

He swept through them, tearing men to pieces and hurling clumps of the bodies in all directions. Screams erupted from his wake. Avorian carried the attack all the way out the western side of the main rebel force, ripping through multiple talons.

He stayed low and banked south toward the loyalist side. Martius lifted his head slightly during the turn and took stock of his gryphons. Avorian sensed out through his bond with the air corps as well.

All were fighting and holding their own. Ptolemas executed another attacking run. Volgus fought in the sky, but Gaius was already within the camp walls, overseeing the last of the retreat.

Martius patted Avorian's neck feathers. The gryphon wiggled his outstretched wings to show he was content and ready for another attacking run. The rider was about to release him when another message came in from the general.

Gaius recalled Martius to the ground. Volgus wanted Avorian over the camp.

Martius straightened in the saddle and Avorian slowed. They angled south, already close to the camp, and lifted over the walls and down into a landing. Exhausted infantry powered through the main gate.

The full din of battle echoed in Martius's ears. There were horns and great clanging. Screams came from all directions beyond the walls, like the legion was surrounded by a horde of demons. But the Fifteenth made good progress in its retreat. Martius estimated maybe half of Gaius's talons were already within the walls and manning the defenses.

Avorian returned to the sky and disappeared north after linking with Volgus. Martius made his way to where Gaius stood directing his rearguard by the gate.

“Martius,” Gaius said. “We don’t have long until dark. We must man the walls. Take the right flank. Find Captain Barnas.”

“Yes, sir.” Martius broke away immediately.

“Monitor the sky duels through Avorian as you can,” Gaius called after him. The general’s voice continued, but he now yelled orders for another portion of the defenses.

Martius pushed around the mass of men flowing through the gate. He caught the briefest glimpse of the fighting retreat outside over the heads of the soldiers. The battle was a dark chaos, hazy with flying sand and the quickly dying daylight. Martius was thankful he was already safely within the walls and hoped the full legion could reach that same safety.

The rider drew his sword and picked up to a run once he was through the mass by the gate. He found Barnas and Fifth Company on the right flank. Talons here manned the ramparts of the wall and Martius spotted a few assault ladders already lifting up from the rebels on the far side.

The enemy pushed outward from the gate. Not all their soldiers could attack the retreating loyalists. Zagros smartly ordered his flanks to encircle the position and push Gaius from all sides. The Fifth, with their proximity to the gate, would take the brunt of the initial assault.

“Where can I help?” Martius yelled over the din.

“To the wall!” Barnas talked over Martius’s question before it even finished. “Send us gryphon support if you can.”

Martius nodded and made straight for the closest set of stairs. Other legionnaires were to support the soldiers already pushing off the rebel

ladders as well. There was a bottleneck and Martius took advantage of the lull in the climb to call upward to Avorian.

The great gryphon had just executed another ground-attack run in the west while fending off a pursuing rebel lesser mount. He twisted in the air and broke away from his tail to head straight for Martius's flank. The others of the air corps adjusted to fill the gap Avorian left behind. The sky swirled with a fury of activity.

Through his gryphon's eyes, Martius saw that the legion still flowed well in their retreat. Their mass outside the walls grew smaller and smaller, matching the dying light of the evening. They were going to get through. Martius's confidence solidified.

The line shifted faster at the top of the stairs and Martius broke to the right and maneuvered through the tight confines of the rampart and threw a glance over the wall. The confidence he'd felt a moment before was blown away by the seething mass of rebels.

It appeared the entire rebel army had chosen to press this one location. Men climbed on top of one another against the barrier. Ladders rode over the crowd, pressing ever forward. A group of engineers hacked at the base of the defenses with axes. If they broke through, the Fifteenth's camp would be turned to a prison of slaughter.

A ladder struck the wall in front of Martius. He grabbed the top rung and shoved. It didn't budge. There were already too many rebels climbing from the bottom and weighting it down. More loyalists joined Martius's position.

"Heave!" came the call over the rider's shoulder.

They pushed, all together and at last pressed the ladder far enough off the wall for it to topple backward. Martius locked eyes with the topmost

rebel climber as it toppled. The soldier's glare slackened, eyes widening as he let go of his handholds and flailed in the air before impact with the mass of infantry below.

More ladders pushed forward. More rebels climbed, many reaching the wall's apex and jumping into the fighting.

Martius moved farther down the wall, sensing danger. A flow of rebels clambered over the lip just ahead. They were close to getting a foothold on the wall and hacked loyalists backward off the rampart. Martius lowered a shoulder and barreled into the fray.

He stabbed the first enemy in the side, carrying through and shoved the rebel off the wall. The other enemies spotted him and turned to fight. They couldn't all press Martius at once, though, given the narrowness of the walkway. The rider spun his blade and beckoned them closer.

He parried and thrust, spun and stabbed. The first enemy fell, blood pouring out from under his armpit. The second rebel stumbled over the first and fell on his own off the wall. The third proved more difficult.

Their swords clanged and Martius tried a counter, but the enemy fended off each attack in succession. Their blades were attached by strings. Everywhere Martius probed, the enemy blocked. But even if this soldier was a good swordsman, he failed to watch his rear. Martius didn't see the spear from his ally until it was thrust through the enemy's back. The rebel's eyes widened. He gave a gurgled cry before falling to the right and rolling off the wall.

Martius caught his breath, only allowing himself a moment's respite. More rebels were coming. The ladders were infinite.

A screaming rush came behind him. He turned, wondering at the sudden deafening noise, but then felt the searing rage through his bond. Avorian

slashed downward, twisting in the air and raking his claws along the outer wall.

The great gryphon tore every ladder the rebels had from the defensive structure, taking numerous enemy soldiers with him. The entire flank fell apart in a mere flash of gryphon wings.

Avorian lifted and barreled off to another part of the battle. He rolled to avoid a diving rebel war beast and then was out of sight. The rebel air corps had hindered his approach and was still holding back Martius's gryphons across the battle.

The wall defenders regrouped. A soldier close to Martius grinned at him. Another clapped a hand on his shoulder. There weren't many feelings better than fighting with the support of a great gryphon in the sky.

With the ladders gone, the rebels lost their momentum. Martius peered over the wall and spotted enemy's rear talons pulling back. The soldiers looked at a loss at what to do next.

"Javelins!"

Reserves from Barnas's talons marched up the stairs, carrying the throwing spears. They loosed two volleys against the rebel attackers, picking them off in their helpless position. The enemy retreat devolved into chaotic flight.

Martius sent another thanks through his bond to Avorian.

He then retreated off the wall, passing Barnas as the commander directed his talons to regroup. Martius showed a clenched fist to encourage the captain. Avorian and the other gryphons would remain close if they needed them.

Darkness fully descended now. Rear legionnaires worked to get a bonfire started in the center of camp and there were already flickers of

smaller fires along the perimeter of the wall. Torches were distributed. Dusk's gloom retreated in the new glow.

It took a moment, but Martius soon realized the din of the battle had fallen away outside. There was still the rippling of gryphons overhead and the occasional yelled order, but the clanging and screaming and stamping of boots had all but ceased.

The rebels fell back. The main gate closed and was barred shut. The full retreat was completed successfully.

Martius found Gaius directing a troop of sappers as they reinforced the main gate with extra beams. No rebels beat against the outside. The general broke away as Martius approached and motioned for the rider to follow.

"We made it," Martius said, out of breath still.

Gaius grinned. "We're safe for now. But stay ready. Keep Avorian alert."

"Yes, sir."

"Take stock of the air corps and send me a status." Gaius stopped and looked around at his soldiers moving all about. He then locked eyes with Martius. "This fight isn't over. They'll come back soon, using the darkness for cover. We must hold."

* * *

Martius slumped to the ground, crossing his legs under him and slouching his back. He stared into the fire. Clavius didn't look up at his return to their

circle. Epicas sat across the flames with drooping eyes that threatened to shudder close. Martius felt about the same.

The rebels had executed two pushes through the early evening and now all was quiet. It was strange to be able to hear the low whirring of the wind and the soft crackle of a fire. There was murmuring throughout the camp. Outside the walls, the occasional call or a drumming of hammers or some other metal instrument sounded. But in general the night was calm.

There were more attacks coming.

Martius's thoughts kept drifting to Talia. As if he were dreaming, hazy images of the empress atop Axias flew through his mind. These thoughts were a view into Avorian's dreams. The great gryphon took a much-deserved break in the gryphon pen. It was his, Marzio, and Ptolemas's time off from their vigil in the sky.

This meant the riders rested as well. Clavius looked like sleep eluded him, however deep the bags under his eyes sank.

Martius's appearance would be about the same, he was sure, but his mind raced in between the lucid images of the empress he fought for. The reminder of Talia drove his focus onward and helped him push through the fatigue and the aches and stiffness of his limbs.

Epicas jolted upward. The rider had nearly fallen asleep and toppled into the flames. He shivered. Then he rubbed at his face before shaking his head.

"Do you think Anshas reached Basilas?" he said.

"Yes," Martius said immediately. The men had discussed the question at length across the legion. This conversation was merely a distraction to stay awake.

“Anshas wouldn’t say so, were you and he in reverse positions,” Clavius said.

Martius allowed himself a laugh. These were also repeated words, the joke passed through the ranks of the air corps at the expense of their dour ally.

“Basilas is marching.” Martius nodded behind the statement he truly believed to be true.

Nothing else was said. The soldiers resumed staring at the fire. It popped loudly in reply, sparks zagging up into the sky.

“If he does arrive tomorrow, we’ve got to fight out of this position and meet him,” Epicas said after a long bout of silence.

Martius bobbed his head in agreement again. Clavius looked up at Epicas with his mouth clamped shut in a grim line.

The tense spell was broken by a scurrying sound off to Martius’s left. His head snapped around, nerves frayed from the constant fighting of the last few days. Someone had stacked their armor against the side of a tent nearby. It shifted and a large rodent appeared, startling Martius enough to jump into a crouch.

The intruder kept to the shadows and scurried away quickly. It had been bulky and gray with hard-looking skin. Martius opened his mouth to speak, but Clavius gave him an answer before he could ask his question.

“An armad, the veteran said. He stood and stepped around the fire in an attempt to spot the creature again. “What is he doing here?”

“Armad?” Martius asked as he resumed his seat.

“Yeah. What our shield formation is named for.” Clavius looked back at the lead air captain. “He must’ve snuck in when we were constructing the walls and now he’s trapped.”

The animal had disappeared. Clavius resumed his seat.

“Maybe that’s a good omen for tomorrow,” Epicas said.

“Maybe—”

Martius’s agreement was cut off by a sudden blaring of horns. They echoed from outside the walls and were quickly enveloped by war cries and the rumble of boots.

“Raid incoming!”

Yells echoed across the camp and the loyalists’ own horns responded. Martius jumped to his feet and bolted into the darkness. Clavius and Epicas were close on his heels, all rushing for the gryphon pen.

“Get to the sky,” Martius called over his shoulder. “Pull in the others. We need a tight screen.”

Neither rider acknowledged the order, but Martius knew they understood. Avorian was awake and ready. The rider threw himself up into the saddle and they were airborne before the first rebel wave struck the outer walls.

More horns sounded and torches flickered around the entire northern circumference of the camp. Shadowy rebel masses converged, pressing at three locations on the defenses, including the main gate. The loyalists shifted to respond to their tactic.

Avorian darted his head side to side, picking his target. Then he cupped his wings and dived, hurling Martius with him, and they struck down against another attack in the dark of night.

Chapter 19

Early morning was long and noisy. A layer of dust settled over the men and the buildings and the camp walls and all sat dirty and tired as the movement of the fighting slowed. The rebels regrouped. Daylight broke on silence.

Gaius had lost count early on of Zagros's attacks. The fighting felt continuous, as at all times there was clanging from some portion of the camp's perimeter. But there were heavier thrusts, each one closer to breaking through than the last.

The rebels penetrated the walls on their final push of the night. Gaius's men strained and shoved back the infiltrating soldiers, but now the general stared at a gap in his wall filled with crumbling debris to the right of the main gate.

He stood with Sergeant Simus from the Fourth and Air Captain Martius. A group of the legion's officer corps waited behind them. Fatigued eyes surveyed the wreckage.

"We'll fix it up, sir," the sapper sergeant said. "The rubble will help us make a barrier. It won't be permanent, but it'll last the day."

"If the rebels allow us that," Gaius said.

"They won't." Martius flicked his eyes to the sky, leaving them for a moment to communicate with Avorian.

Gaius turned to the rider. "Are they already massing?"

“Looks like it.” Haze fled from Martius’s eyes and he looked at Gaius.

“Get the wounded back,” Gaius said, now speaking to the larger group. “Sappers will fix the wall. Bring me three talons from Fourth Company. We’re sallying forth. Air cavalry covers us.”

The rider nodded and bolted off to the gryphon pen. Captain Harmodius, standing in the back of the crowd, split off as well.

Basilas and First Company had not appeared on the horizon in the night. The marching distance from Lectra was too far. Even assuming the company had started the previous morning, they may not make Gura by nightfall of this new day. Gaius was still alone.

The legion mobilized around the general. Simus’s sappers carried in excess beams from the camp’s initial construction and set to work the internal repairs. They hauled off broken bits of wood from the rubble pile and cleared a path for soldiers to exit for Gaius’s plan.

Three talons marched up to the gap. Gaius drew his sword and finally moved, marching to the head of the force. Volgus circled in the rear. He would soon join his rider on the ground but waited to see where the rebels would push their force. Sappers pushed a final pile away from the opening and Simus gave a nod to his general. It was time.

The morning was dry and the enemy kicked up dust outside the walls. Gaius led his soldiers forward and out into the growing daylight.

A company’s worth of rebel Belgadan legionnaires marched straight for the sallying force. They came in a flat line, but upon seeing the loyalists, they buckled and spread out wider to engulf the defenders.

A ballista bolt cracked from the wall. The spear plowed into the center of the enemy mass, flinging broken bodies in all directions. Zagros’s side had their own artillery, but for now they were aimed at the gate.

Gaius arrayed his men in an arced defense. With a glance to his left, the general found more rebels advancing to additional points along the wall. The other officers would have to deal with each different attack. Gaius had his own work cut out for him here.

The enemy charged across the desert sand.

“Shields!”

Gaius’s command sent a rising clatter up his ranks. He stood just behind his front line with his flanks arcing on either side to the wall behind. They protected the sappers at work.

The rebels smashed into the formation, spreading along the curved line. The loyalists buckled backward. Gaius took two steps back to avoid being knocked over. Boots dug deep into the sand and swords hacked against shields and grunts turned to screams and war cries.

The skirmish devolved into a stalemate of shield walls as the two sides ground into each other. The rebels had more weight to them and soon their entire line surrounded Gaius on three sides.

But the legionnaires of Fourth Company held. They had support from the fort, javelins and artillery both. Their shields were tight and the front line was bolstered by desperation. Gaius lent his shoulder to the scrum.

He stole a glance behind and saw the sappers hammering boards into the outer wall. The work looked like patchwork on a spinster’s quilt back in Belgada, wooden pieces of different colors with a number crooked in their hasty assembly.

The sappers needed to hurry. Before Gaius could even turn back forward, his right flank shifted and gave ground. On his left, the shield wall buckled but didn’t break, bending backwards and swelling with a mass of

rebels. The general felt the strain through his contact with the men around him.

He straightened and stepped back, losing contact but gaining a better vantage. Swords hacked and loyalists fell and there were no reinforcements at Gaius's disposal. He pointed his sword and ran to the right along with others in the rear. He threw his weight against the might of the rebels.

The bulge slowed but didn't retract.

There was a groaning like the hull of a sinking ship about to burst. Then the line shattered and rebel swords flung forward and spilled loyalist blood. The legionnaire in front of Gaius toppled. He parried a sword and then a spear. He reversed into a thrust and kicked a rebel backward.

The enemies were endless and they rushed onward in a swarm of arms and boots and shields and blades. Gaius had one more trick remaining as his soldiers fell.

He called his great gryphon out of the sky.

Like a thunderclap, Volgus responded. The war beast screeched and dropped with all four claws extended. Blood and bodies erupted from where he landed. He lashed out with his wings and front claws and tore through the main mass of rebels. The pressure on Gaius's line released.

The general executed one scan of his line and confirmed their need to retreat. He raised his sword above his head.

"Fall back! To the wall!"

The left was breaking as well. His arc ceased to be a line and compressed back on itself.

A ballista bolt screamed overhead and struck a distant portion of the enemy force. Two gryphons streaked low and a lesser gryphon dropped on an attacking run adjacent Volgus. The rebel gryphons reacted to Gaius's war

beast with passes of their own. Volgus kicked into the sky as a blur struck out of the enemy's rear.

Zagros's own mount, Naxos, joined the fray.

He struck at Volgus. The loyalist evaded with a roll and flapped for altitude. He swung around to head for the camp walls. Naxos pursued him but was pushed away by javelin tosses from the infantry and a ballista angling for his flight path.

Zagros's war beast had accomplished his goal, though. He'd freed the rebels on the ground to pursue Gaius's forces once more. More gryphons dived over the infantry, but soon the infantry hit the loyalist rear and Gaius was swept up in the flow of the retreat.

His talons converged on the wall. Sappers waved the soldiers through. A rearguard formed a shield wall just outside the barrier and the crush of rebels enveloped them.

Gaius stopped just outside the hole. A screeching enemy gryphon flew in from the north. He watched as the war beast set his wings and stretched out his claws, barreling directly for the general. He loomed larger and larger. A loyalist mount slammed into the beast from the side. The gryphons careened away amid screeching and fluttering feathers.

Rebels cut through the shield wall in front of Gaius and he flicked a sword out in response. He cut down two of the enemy but then fell back parrying multiple weapons at once. Legionnaires came to his aid, but the formation couldn't be saved in its collapse.

A hand gripped his cape and pulled him back. Gaius fought to stay near the front but was soon pushed through the gate by the flow of men and multiple soldiers dragging their general away from danger. Most of his men

would get through, but those in the rear were slowly cut down. The bodies piled up in heaps.

Gaius stumbled into the camp and tried to move his mind to the next task. Screams and clangs distracted him. There were dying men still beyond the freshly sealed barrier. Sappers struck the last nails into place.

Volgus hovered above and then dropped to land in an open spot next to his rider. Gaius needed to get into the sky and assess the rest of the defense. Perhaps he could find Zagros and Naxos up there and strike at the head of this rebel mass. That would partly make up for the soldiers he'd just sacrificed in fixing the wall.

Behind him, the last rebel rush was pushed away with long spears and javelin throws. The enemy hacked at the newly repaired wall but had lost their chance at bursting through.

Gaius mounted up on his gryphon. He pointed with his sword and directed reinforcements back to the main gate. The injured of his sallying force were helped to the center of camp.

Volgus kicked into the sky. Gaius left the infantry fighting to his grounded officers. Sand swirled in the air even at higher altitudes. It appeared as if the camp was engulfed in a massive whirlwind. Rebels swarmed on all sides outside the walls, but just beyond their perimeter the sky and landscape were clear.

The horizon was empty in the north. The Fifteenth remained alone.

Volgus angled for the western flank and pulled along the legion's rear position. Visibility fell away as the dust engulfed them. The rebel gryphon targets were flickering shadows. Volgus tracked a formation of three enemies flying in from the west and chasing two lesser mounts from the Fifteenth.

Volgus's eyes focused on the lead rebel. A warm rage emanated from his chest. Naxos led this charge.

The mount was riderless. Zagros would be coordinating the infantry attacks on the ground. Naxos was plenty capable of destruction on his own, though, and Volgus could severely weaken the rebel army in one swooping blow with a victorious duel here.

The loyalist gryphon soared in opposite the rebel flight path. The enemies spotted him and turned off their chase, breaking to their left and holding in tight formation. Another gryphon fell in on Gaius's right. Ptolemas, with Clavius on his back, pulled close to Volgus's wing.

Two other lesser mounts, Marzio and Leos, circled their flights to join their leader's formation as well. Volgus kept his eyes forward, focused on Naxos.

Gaius half expected the rebels to flee back to their side and the support of their infantry. But they held to a curving path over the camp and gave Volgus an opportunity to chase. Gaius let his gryphon take the bait and four loyalist mounts pressed after the three rebels.

The general noticed Naxos's head twisting back to monitor his pursuers. Gaius had seen Volgus's strategic mind at work in many duels in the past and knew to never underestimate a gryphon, even without a rider present. Naxos had a plan here.

The general risked a look over the larger battle. Multiple duels twisted among each other throughout the sky. He spotted a pair of rebel mounts giving chase to Avorian and Martius. Where Naxos led them became clear all at once, but too late.

Avorian's two rebel tails flung themselves away and into Gaius's flank. Clavius and Ptolemas swung to block, Marzio tight at their side. They

forced the flanking rebels downward and off their attacking path, barreling below Gaius. Ptolemas twisted to give chase.

When the general and Volgus turned their eyes back forward, Naxos had altered course. He'd turned somehow, and now shot straight at them. Gaius's eyes widened. Volgus gave a screech in alarm.

The mount swung upside down, putting his body between him and the outstretched talons of the rebel war beast. They angled down, aiming to pass below their attacker. Gaius's head spun. Volgus's wings flapped one more time before Naxos struck him.

A snapping crunch barreled through them. Gaius squeezed with his legs to hold the saddle. The two beasts rolled, beaks and claws slashing at each other and wings sending feathers in all directions.

The world blurred and Gaius lost what was ground and what was sky. Everything blended into colors of brown and gray and nothingness. But soon the rushing pull of the ground filled his head. The gryphons focused on each other and Gaius feared they would both smash into the middle of the fighting.

Volgus jolted and threw Gaius to the side. His hands slipped off the reins and his legs weren't strong enough against his mount's flanks. A sickening drop came to his stomach as he came loose from the saddle.

The blurring of the world solidified. Clarity returned. Gaius was off his mount, high above the ground, while Volgus was locked into fighting another great gryphon. Everything slowed and Gaius's eyelids slowly closed in a blink. When they reopened, he had a view of Volgus on top of Naxos with two front claws gripping the enemy's breastplate.

But the loyalist released the position of strength. His head craned to the side, eyes wide and focused on Gaius's descent. Volgus held the upper

hand. He could finish Naxos and severely weaken the rebel side, perhaps cripple their air cavalry. But that would mean letting his rider fall to the sand and bodies and wreckage below.

A bonded gryphon would never make such a choice.

Volgus kicked off Naxos and flung himself after Gaius. The world whirled back to normal speed. Gaius flailed his arms about, futilely fighting the fall. His mount was quick and stuck a wing out under the general. Gaius flung an arm and groped at feathers. He found a grip but was nearly thrown off once more as Volgus tilted them.

The general rolled to the saddle and startled at the sand streaking past below Volgus's talons. They only barely avoided the ground.

Volgus pushed out on the western flank and found clear sky while Gaius hauled himself back to a sitting position. Once secure, he collapsed forward and lay his chest and cheek on his gryphon's neck. He tried to get his heart to stop hammering as he sent a silent thanks through their bond. Volgus accepted but was back to focusing on the battle.

Gaius took a moment more than his mount but soon straightened himself and took in the view of the camp and the defense of its walls. No further breaches had formed yet, but it was clear breakages could be coming. There were too many rebels and the loyalists were trapped and running out of resources to defend.

The general gritted his teeth and moved to tug Volgus's reins and send them back into battle. He would direct the great gryphon down against the infantry and attempt to push the rebel legionnaires off the wall and give the grounded defenders some respite.

But Volgus's attention had turned elsewhere. The great gryphon stared over the northern horizon. Gaius looked in the same direction. It wasn't like

Volgus to be distracted. A new dust cloud approached the rebel rear.

Gaius blinked. Hope returned to his world, brightening everything. He smiled, the wide expression cutting easily through the tense muscles along his jaw.

Basilas and the reinforcements of First Company were here.

Chapter 20

A darkness engulfed their destination as Basilas pushed his men onward. They'd marched through the night and the men were tired and needed a break. But the rest of their legion was in trouble. Their allies and friends needed saving.

The three gryphons at Basilas's disposal had scouted ahead in the early morning and returned with a full report. None had been spotted with the enemy so focused on their attack. Gaius was besieged within a small encampment just outside of Gura with rebel legionnaires swarming around his walls.

The first spear pulled back the gryphons and kept them over his column for the last portion of the march. His shoulder still throbbed from the skirmish with the gryphons at Anshas's arrival, but all pain had receded to a dull rumble in the background. The soreness wouldn't keep him from this fight.

Looking up, he found Ponderas flying closest to him. Anshas and his mount had been the brave messengers bringing news of Gaius's trouble. Now Basilas would unleash him in the other direction, requiring more daring bravery.

"Fly," Basilas said in a normal voice. The rider high above wouldn't hear, but he saw the first spear's signal that went along with the words. Ponderas soared forward immediately.

Anshas would take word to Gaius of their impending arrival and relay Basilas's plan. The two friends couldn't meet and strategize together. The only course was to scream forward and try to break the rebel rear and hope to free the Fifteenth.

As far as the prima captain knew, the rebels hadn't spotted the company's approach yet. Zagros's position was shrouded in the dust and he'd be focused on destroying Gaius's trapped legionnaires.

The soldiers marched silently onward. Basilas used the land to his advantage, sneaking his column between rolling, low dunes.

A horseman approached from the south, galloping around a bend. The scout pulled to a stop and turned to trot next to Basilas without dismounting. He nodded his head up the path.

"They'll spot us around this dune," the scout said. "We're close. Make ready for attack."

Basilas nodded grimly. His men had made good time, but now came the rush into battle.

"Thank you," he said to the scout. He then turned to his signal corps behind him. "Make ready to attack, formation shift on my signal."

The orders were relayed silently. There were no marching drums or attack horns yet. The soldiers kept silent, even though the rebels in the thick of battle would never hear their approach. Basilas wanted to be cautious.

But as the head of the column rounded the bend, all hesitation and quiet twirled away by the swirling whirlwind of the rebel force. The enemy was just before them, across a field of cracked, arid earth.

The rebel camp faced away, soldiers unaware of the First's arrival.

Now Basilas had some decisions to make. Before him was the main attack. But there was cavalry skirmishing in the west as well and those rebel

horsemen could wheel and hit the First in the rear once it was spotted.

His gryphon riders responded as if they could read the first spear's mind. Ponderas flew in from the west and Anshas signaled down to the first spear.

He showed a sweeping, open hand followed by a point to the west.

Cavalry clear, he relayed.

Next came a fist press against his chest. Then a finger down at the ground.

But they're close, stay ready.

Basilas acknowledged the message and responded with a quick order of his own. He held up a fist before opening his hand and turning it at eye level with his palm toward the ground. The gryphons needed to hold over the main attack in case the rebel air corps appeared.

Even before he finished with the motion, Basilas was shouting more orders over his grounded troops. His talons broke out of their march column and spread wider into an attack formation. Basilas commanded a single line with his talons bunched into three groups to be able to maneuver wherever their attack was needed.

The loyalists shifted into position and careened over the open ground to the enemy. Basilas slowed to a stop, finished with his orders, and stared over the heads of his troops as they advanced.

The enemy rear was lower in a small bowl of a valley. Masses of rebels pushed up the rise against Gaius beyond. Their rear stood badly exposed.

Basilas released his men. The rebels finally spotted the approach. Enemy legionnaires turned to meet the company but were in disorganized rows trending toward utter chaos.

Zagros's air cavalry responded better than their grounded allies, but only two lesser mounts broke away from the main fighting and turned to the rear. Basilas's own mounts spiraled into duels, keeping the enemy beasts harmlessly in the sky.

Drums beat and a single, long horn rumbled. The company's foot soldiers charged. Basilas ran with his men, drawing Pothos from its sheath and holding the blade high as he was swept forward. He didn't carry a shield, but those of his allies rattled against each other as the wall of men rushed against the surprised enemy. The great crescendo came with a slamming through the rebel ranks.

Steel slashed through flesh. Blood splattered. Men were toppled and thrown back and the loyalists bowled through the rebel defenders.

Zagros's rear wasn't fortified. The rebel had been too focused on attacking Gaius, confident of victory. There were no walls or barricades and even the artillery of the rebels was trained on the fort and too far away to make a difference. Basilas swung his sword and felt Pothos bite into a toppling enemy.

He stepped over his first kill and was consumed by screams and clashes on all sides. Rebels were meshed all throughout his legionnaires now, but the attack kept advancing. Basilas carried on with them, riding the wave of fury and the adrenaline that drowned out fatigue. He hacked at rebels as they fell without a challenge. The talons rolled over the enemy, running through tents and wooden structures of the outer camp.

Overhead, gryphons screeched across the dust-filled sky. Basilas brought his sword up and slashed through a rebel before bringing Pothos down in a quick reversal against a second enemy. He lowered his shoulder and knocked a new target into the shield of a nearby ally and then swiped

through two more rebels. Everywhere before him, Zagros's men stumbled and fled.

But soon the momentum slowed. There was suddenly a wall of enemies before them. Basilas called out a halt. Signals flags and horns repeated the order. His talons couldn't overextend. Their surprise had run its course.

Javelins launched from the new rebel line and the spears cracked into Basilas's men. The prima captain ducked under one projectile and swiped at the legs of a rebel still within the loyalist ranks. He stood and tried to slash at the neck of another, but Pothos rang against a parry at last. A rebel finally fought back.

The prima captain smiled and the enemy before him snarled. Basilas lashed out with his free hand, jabbing into the enemy's teeth with a mailed fist. The rebel stumbled, gripping his mouth, and Basilas stepped over him, not even deigning to finish him off himself. He pushed to the front of his talons where a shield wall had been thrown together.

Two formations, one rebel and one loyal to Belgada, pressed against each other. The metal of the shields groaned. Basilas couldn't see his flanks. There was too much haze and too many men.

A gryphon dived from the sky and crashed into the loyalists' ranks. Its wings raked a crater to Basilas's right and he only barely dived out of the way before the mount took off and scraped claws through his position. The damage caused First Company to falter back a few steps.

Basilas struggled to his feet. The rebel mount was already locked in a battle with Ponderas. The enemy had sacrificed a superior position to cut into the first spear's men. He'd succeeded, but now had to fight his way back to clear altitude. Anshas wasn't going to make that easy.

Basilas pinched the bridge of his nose, shook his head, and tried to reset himself. His men shifted to fill the gap from the gryphon strike. The battle ebbed and flowed like the tide of a river blown by unpredictable winds. Basilas needed to get his men farther upstream.

He ducked forward and threw his shoulder against the man in front of him.

“Heave!”

Basilas’s order was amplified by other officers. The forward soldiers grunted and yelled through gritted teeth. Their shields shoved out as one. Rebels stumbled backward. The loyalists gained ground, only to be hit with an immediate counter.

Shields cracked back at the First’s. Basilas was knocked back by the force of the blow. The formation compressed and pushed harder, shields and shoulders against backs in a massive scrum. More gryphons ripped overhead and Basilas lost everything else around him. His talons were making progress, however slow.

This flank would give Gaius and the main legion the room needed in defense. If they couldn’t break them, they’d be a distraction to save the army and ease the pressure of Zagros’s grand attack. Nearly surrounded and alone on the wrong side of a battlefield, Basilas called out for another heave.

* * *

Gaius only allowed himself a few moments to stare at Basilas's beautiful talons striking the rear of the rebel force. He shifted back in Volgus's saddle and then snapped the reins. His great gryphon powered higher into the air.

They dived through the various gryphon duels. Epicas and Marzio chased an enemy on their right at the same time as Clavius and Ptolemas climbed in pursuit of another rebel. The aerial battles spun in all directions, as if the world itself was twisting and the horizon flipped on its side.

But the Fifteenth's general focused on one location. Volgus soared over the besieging rebel army and made a banking pass as close to Basilas as possible. The reinforcements slammed into the rebel rear, piercing the camp and breaking apart the sparse rear guard. Their momentum slowed quickly, but the shock of the arrival shuddered through Zagros's position.

With a nod, Gaius raced through his next moves.

He didn't need to adjust their path. Volgus already headed to their command position. The great gryphon ducked under the swiping claws of a random rebel passing the other direction and then set his wings for a landing.

They touched down and Gaius leaped out of the saddle. He pointed out his orders to the men gathering around him.

"Reinforcements are here," he raised his voice to carry over the din of battle. "Our wall is still weak and could break at any moment. But we will push them back. We strike out now."

He pointed behind him to the camp's back wall. "Sixth Company is to break out and circle to the left flank." Men were already scattering at his orders. "The Second and Third will lead a charge out the main gate. If there are other portions of the wall we can push out of, use them. Hit their line with everything we've got."

Gaius stepped to Volgus. The gryphon stood over his shoulder, focused and ready for more fighting. The general reached back and grabbed his reins tightly.

“Let’s end this,” he said to the men closest to him. “We crush them here and now.”

The general’s shakiness after his near fall was forgotten. There was command needed and a victory to steal. He swung back onto Volgus and they kicked into the sky. The motion of his legion swirled below them.

A company’s worth of legionnaires burst from the camp’s rear and circled to the west. The soldiers ran for the enemy’s flank. Basilas still pressed from the north. The main force of the Fifteenth sallied from their fortified gates and struck against Zagros the bully. Above, gryphon duels still raged.

The sky’s cloud cover hung low over the battle’s rising dust. Volgus soared into the thick of the aerial fighting and rejoined the twirling flight of duels. Gaius and his mount weren’t going to let the opportunity to bloody their enemy go to waste.

* * *

Martius caught his breath during a lull in the gryphon fighting as Avorian flapped through a dense dust cloud. The great gryphon found clean air on the other side and set his wings to a glide. The rider exhaled and tried to clear his mind as he decided where they were needed next.

Hoplas pounced on them from above.

Avorian sensed the attack and darted to one side. The evasion threw them off course and Hoplas swung past them but turned to give chase. The loyalists fled, diving for the ground.

This was another turn in a repetitive cycle that Martius had no control over. They shook off Goras and Hoplas's attacks only to be set upon by another mount from the rebel side or to be pushed again by the lead rebel. All the while, Zagros's infantry compressed closer around the camp below.

They were within the twisting of a miniature Infinity curve, on the lower, and trapped with fatigue settling over his entire air corps.

There had been a brief rising hope of salvation when they'd spotted Basilas's arrival. First Company streaked in and broke up the rebel rear. That released some of the tension on Gaius's defenders below, but the siege was far from broken. Basilas was now bogged down and the main legion pushed outward to help them.

Martius's air corps could do nothing but defend and evade in the skies against the superior numbers of the rebel war beasts.

A victory felt close but fleeting. Martius's opponent kept him at bay.

Hoplas screeched behind them as he flapped hard, slowly closing the gap between them. Avorian pulled out of his dive and shot their duel around the southern end of the loyalist position. Goras stayed low in his saddle and held a glare focused on his prey.

Martius shook off a shiver gripping his spine. There were other war beasts twirling all about and up ahead rose the eastern flank where the grounded cavalry still skirmished.

The rider spotted an opportunity among the duels of his lesser gryphons. Avorian took in the same positions and predicted Martius's strategy through their bond. He tilted his body to the right without need of instruction and

pulled their pursuers off course. He then swung back to the left and climbed into the path of Clavius and Ptolemas's duel.

The initial twitch of misdirection was enough for Hoplas to be a moment behind in following and Avorian used the space to make his breakaway. He flew over the rebel mount that Clavius pursued, slashing at the rebel rider with his trailing talons. Ptolemas banked into Hoplas to block off their recovery with a flutter of his wings.

Martius craned his head back as Avorian hooked in an effort to find a counterattack against his rebel opposite. Hoplas fell away and pressed low to the dunes on the eastern flank of the camp. He flew north and was already too far ahead for Avorian to catch up. Martius snapped his reins, wanting to pursue anyway.

Avorian swung their course over but didn't dive. He leveled and mirrored Hoplas's arcing path from the opposite side of the battle. It was only now that Martius looked over the ground fighting and took full stock of the assault.

The rebels were falling away. They fled west toward the river. Basilas's flank had broken them in the east and the enemy was devolving into retreat out the only route they had remaining. The Fifteenth clung to their walls, with multiple companies charging after the broken enemy.

Goras and Hoplas had noticed their infantry's defeat. Avorian slowed to a hover, his broad chest heaving from the rush of the fight. Martius stared after his opposite air captain. Goras met eyes with Martius across the battlefield.

The smoldering expression the rebel held showed their dueling wasn't over. The enemy would continue their fight. They'd failed in their great

scheme to break the Fifteenth and destroy Martius's air cavalry, but more war would come. Zagros's army wasn't defeated.

But neither were the loyalists.

A swelling of heat, first from deep within Avorian's chest and then a matching sensation from Martius's own soul, simmered between the pair. Pride welled and the rider blinked away moisture behind his eyes. He wiped at the joyous tears and watched First Company march across the battlefield to link up with Gaius's defending companies.

The loyalists would hold for Belgada. They would fight for Talia and destroy her enemies. Whatever Goras and Zagros had in store for Avorian and Martius next, they welcomed it. The rebels could retreat, but Gaius and the Fifteenth would be close on their tail.

Book Two

How the echoes of his father's failures must've droned within the general's ears. How the terrors of Cabiri must've thrummed from the memories of all his brave legionnaires. And yet, they march on. The legion crossed the Gura and attacked Locria and Khora and his hated throngs. They marched on.

Philosophical Musings on the Memnas Chronicles, Darus the Younger,
Year of Infinity 187

Chapter 21

“**B**ardylis should be led through the streets in a cage and strangled with his own belt rope.” Pythias’s whetstone screeched as he scraped it along his sword. “Ecbas is working on it, of course.”

Verstappas remained silent in his warm-up position but wondered if the senate guardsmen believed any of the words he spoke. This was all a ruse to the Scipian’s mind, pure misdirection, a flashy feint thrust during a sword fight to draw an opponent’s guard away from the center.

But Verstappas didn’t carry a sword. He didn’t fall for tricks. His shield could stop all of Pythias’s jabs, whether verbal or physical and enforced with sharp steel.

“He’s being slow about it, if you were to ask me. And I know Talia’s frustrated with the progress,” Pythias continued. “How would your city state of Scipia deal with such traitors?”

Verstappas didn’t see a way to avoid answering this question, but when he opened his mouth, Pythias cut him off.

“I don’t mean nowadays, with so much Belgadan influence among your people. I mean in ancient times, with Harpalus or even before, when you shield bearers held the pass against Rantum’s barbaric ancestors.”

Verstappas rested on his knees and sat back on his heels to loosen the hamstrings and ankles before sparring. Grunts and clangs from the training ground behind called out to him. He wasn’t a student of history, but he

knew enough about his old order to give the guardsmen the answer he wanted.

“Death without his shield, were he a warrior. Exile if he wasn’t. He’d be left alone in the mountains for the wolves to devour.”

Pythias chuckled, amused and content with the answer. He shook the whetstone in Verstappas’s direction.

“That’s what Bardylis deserves.” The senate guardsman went back to sharpening his blade and smiled with bared teeth as he continued. “Belgada’s gone soft. We’ve lost our edge. The lead bodyguard of our Aptorians doesn’t even carry a sword, no offense to you, of course.”

Verstappas stood. He shook out his arms and shoulders, flexing his shield arm and making sure the muscles rippled clearly in the senate guardsman’s direction. In the time it took for his leg tendons to retract and his joints to pop back together after holding the seated stretch for so long, he imagined the edge of his shield cracking out Pythias’s teeth. He left the guardsman without another word.

“Enjoy the time with your new girl,” the commander threw after him.

The Aptorian had to fight to keep his stride steady. He was indeed walking over to where the Tyrhian Halys sparred, but he wasn’t sure what Pythias meant by calling her Verstappas’s new girl. It was another feint, that was all.

Verstappas navigated the perimeter of the training ground, passing legionnaires and guards at work. He came to his target quickly. Halys’s sparring movements, like Verstappas’s own, contrasted starkly to the Belgadans nearby. The citizens passed through tight movements of sword and spear thrusts with grim efficiency.

Halys spun and swung her single spear about, moving elastically with far greater strength than Verstappas expected from a woman. The Belgadan women in the legions were compact, quick, and deadly. But they had nowhere near the reach of Halys's spear.

The Scipian stopped at the edge of her circle and let the warrior finish the last of her passes. She put her back to the enemy too much, in Verstappas's opinion and he spotted the openings that an experienced warrior would exploit. His mind made note of the gaps involuntarily, a habit from his decades as a fighter. But also his eyes drifted to parts of the captain's body that he would never watch from his normal opponents.

"Yeah?"

Halys's voice snapped Verstappas out of his stupor. He blinked dumbly against the sun as he looked up to her face. She scowled at him, but one eyebrow was cocked upward in something like intrigue.

"You move well," he managed to stammer out.

"I'm aware," Halys said.

The Tyrhian stepped out of the circle and Verstappas hefted his shield and replaced her at its center. He tried to push past his embarrassment and focused on strapping his metal disk tight on his arm and flexing his muscles top to bottom to ensure his readiness. Neck, shoulders, back, arms, core, legs, ankles. After this final check, he bounced on the balls of his feet, lithe and ready and free.

He then threw himself into his movements. His shield started in front. He dropped his hips low over a forward lunge. Holding his protective disc steady in front of his chest, he shifted his feet in response to a shadow opponent's jabs.

“If you’re attacked by an actual enemy, do you just block until someone comes to your aid?”

Halys’s question was not a distraction. Verstappas worked through the simplest of the Scipian forms. He continued building up his flow by adding movements from his free arm and spinning behind his shield, hips rising and falling.

“No, I’m plenty deadly without a blade.” He punched forward all at once. The sharp edge of his disc gleamed on the edge of his large shield arm.

“I see.” Halys thought for a moment. “And if Pythias attacked you, the guardsman who’s always talking over you at the council, what then?”

“I would end him quickly.”

Verstappas thrust with the shield low before bringing it up in a swift uppercut then dropping back to a low stance behind the metal barrier in a flash. Were this a real fight, his opponent, preferably Pythias himself, would be knocked out on the ground with a shattered jaw.

Halys grunted. The noise could mean agreement, understanding, or disbelief. Verstappas couldn’t interpret it properly. In the Scipian’s brief experience with the Tyrhian, the latter was the most likely.

“Show me,” Halys said. She stepped into the circle before Verstappas could respond, stopping the remainder of his forms.

The Aptorian straightened and moved off the center of the ring. Halys spun her spear and then tucked it up under one arm. She dropped into a ready stance. Verstappas only raised an eyebrow in reply.

“I’m training,” he said.

“So am I.”

The Tyrhian's face was stone. She wasn't joking. Verstappas needed to show her that this wasn't play.

He widened his legs and dropped forward in a lunge again. His hips were low, but he was balanced and the weight of his shield pulled him over his front leg. The two fighters stared at each other. Then Halys's spear stabbed out, perfectly timed to one of Verstappas's blinks.

He parried the thrust away easily. His feet didn't move, only his shield arm.

Halys's spear butt swung around and Verstappas ducked, rolling his hips and back leg as the two opponents switched sides.

A brief distracting thought hit his mind. He hoped Pythias and the other senate guardsmen present weren't watching. They would have plenty of jokes to make later if they were.

But the distraction proved fleeting, as Halys was swift and pressed once more with her spear. She spun again and darted side to side. Verstappas held his position and refused to fall for any of her feints. The Tyrhian was elastic once more, snapping the spear with strength that she pulled from somewhere Verstappas couldn't see.

The spear tip struck low and Verstappas pinned the weapon into the ground with his shield. He snapped his disc forward, smacking it against the middle of the rod and feeling victory materializing before him.

But when he stepped back, the spear wasn't broken. Halys merely retreated to stand just outside of striking distance. Had Verstappas missed somehow?

She stuck the spear butt in the ground and leaned her weight against the shaft. She nodded to herself. "You are fast, I give you that. I see now how you would hold your own against someone with a real weapon."

The Scipian gave her a tight grin in reply. This was similar to what Verstappas had seen hundreds of times before. Anyone not used to a shield bearer's ways was surprised, if not taken aback entirely, after first contact. But something told him the Tyrhian wasn't finished with her own tricks.

Halys attacked again, this time using a different tack. She used the entire length of her spear as an advantage. Verstappas kept his shield high. But the Tyrhian's goal was to get his feet moving and she succeeded with each successive long jab.

Another common mistake from foreigners came to the fore as Verstappas blocked the blows. Every opponent assumed the shield bearer was defensive by default. They believed that because the order shunned swords and offensive weapons, that they were passive and against striking out and counters.

This was incorrect.

For hundreds of years, Scipia had conquered and dominated the city states around it using the shield bearers as a central military unit. There were regular spearman to make up the main phalanx, but the Scipian round shield could be just as deadly on attack as opposed to hiding behind when wielded by the elite of his unit.

The Tyrhian's blunted spear tip pinged off the Scipian's disc again. Verstappas sprung underneath before Halys could pull the shaft back. He turned his shield, finally breaking his defensive shell, and lunged out with its offensive edge slicing for his opponent's chest.

To Halys's credit, she reacted well, sidestepping. But Verstappas was now within her guard. She pulled the weapon back. Verstappas shoved her off balance with his shield and her spear went flying away. He pivoted to keep within close range and finish the maneuver.

The Tyrhian raised a leg and kicked off the disc before Verstappas could throw his full weight against his next maneuver. She launched and landed in the dirt with a roll. Verstappas followed. The enemy climbed to her knees but found the ever-present shield over her once more.

“Yield,” the Scipian said.

Halys grinned up at him. Verstappas looked down, surprised to see the spear back in her hands.

He followed the length of the weapon and his eyes widened further. The spear was under his shield and up within his guard. The blunted sparring point sat in front of his midsection and could easily slip within his armor.

Verstappas stepped back, brow furrowed. His shield fell to his side as he thought through his memories of the duel. The Tyrhian had been quick. He’d lost track of her spear. Halys stood all the way up and dusted herself off, still smiling.

“That was... Unexpected,” the shield bearer said.

“I’m surprised you fell for it.” Halys spun her weapon in one hand and dropped to a ready stance.

Verstappas couldn’t remember the last time someone had penetrated his guard.

“Again?” Halys asked.

“Again.” The Scipian brought his shield up once more and focused on his lithe and confusing opponent. He wouldn’t underestimate her again.

Wood clanged against metal once more and the chorus of their duel climbed to a frenetic pace. Halys never tired and always asked for more, even as Verstappas turned away the majority of her attacks.

The Scipian lost count, but he estimated they completed twenty more duels. Halys broke through his guard perhaps twice more, but even that was

miraculously more than anyone else in Belgada had ever managed. Begrudgingly, Verstappas had to admit the Tyrhian could fight.

He also found himself distracted by her movements and couldn't be sure the woman wasn't purposefully drawing his eye to certain curves on her body. Her hips wove and her shoulders shook and her spear spun continuously around it all. When at last Verstappas called a halt to the proceedings, he found himself dripping with sweat. Halys looked fresh.

"I need to take your shield techniques back to my islands. Some of our troops could make use of them," Halys said as she sat down outside the sparring circle next to Verstappas.

"They take years to learn and a lifetime to master." Verstappas laid his shield in the dirt between them and looked the disc over for any dents or scratches.

"We're quick learners. We have to be."

Verstappas grunted. The distraction of their fighting faded and the worries of the palace and Empress Talia returned in full. He needed a new distraction.

"How'd you end up so close with the empress?"

The Scipian hadn't gotten the full story of Talia's adventures. He only knew the princess had been captured at sea and the rebel ship was taken by Tyrhians after a storm. Somehow, Talia had pulled the entire Tyrhian fleet over to the Belgada cause and saved the empire at Arta.

"I could ask the same of you," Halys said by way of a nonanswer. "You tell Talia no more than anyone else. You also shadow her wherever she goes. If I remember my younger years, that would've set my anger off extremely quickly."

Verstappas chuckled. Halys had the right of it.

“I think I do annoy her,” he said. “Circumstances have changed and she needs a strong advisor, though. That includes you. Her father asked me to focus on her protection from an early age, and that irked her initially. But I don’t talk much. We get by.”

“You’re talking plenty now,” Halys said, mirth ringing behind her words.

Verstappas startled. The Tyrhian was correct once again. He was speaking much more than normal.

He chose to grunt as a reply this time.

Silence stretched between them and Verstappas was tempted to break it by asking more about the Tyrhian Isles. He fought off the urge. It was often better to remain silent and stay mysterious and vague in situations. And besides, the quiet was easy between them and not awkward.

Halys eventually spoke on her own.

“If I’m honest, I feel I’m in over my head with this place.” The Tyrhian stared across the training grounds, not seeing the various guardsmen and their sword forms. “I’m better on a ship. I need action, something to attack.”

“I’ve noticed,” Verstappas said.

The woman glared at him sideways. “You Belgadans don’t engage directly, at least when it comes to what you call politics. I can’t help Talia here. She’s better off sending me to the front and having me join your legions.”

Verstappas had to fight off a laugh at the image of the Tyrhian holding a shield and a short sword and marching with legionnaires. He understood her point, though. The palace was a difficult place to navigate. Verstappas’s own failures within the building loomed large.

“Talia needs support,” he said before realizing it was a general statement that didn’t help matters. “We have to help her find her footing. Too many scheming nobles want her ear, or worse, her throne, for themselves. We need to push them away.”

Halys nodded, mouth grim. Verstappas’s mind raced, his eyes distant and cloudy with memories of failures and the specter a dark future.

“I’m scared I’ll fail,” the Scipian added quietly after a while.

“We won’t.”

The hard confidence had returned to Halys’s voice. She looked at Verstappas and the guardsman knew she meant every one of her words.

“We fight for her,” she said. “If it comes of violence, all the better. We shield her, protect her.”

There was a soft clanging and Verstappas looked down at the shield between them. Halys had knocked her knuckle against it once. Usually, a shield bearer never allowed anyone to touch his shield. Only in battle would an object besides his body strike the metal disc. But Verstappas let Halys’s slight slide without a second thought.

“We protect her together,” Verstappas agreed. He stood up, hauling his shield with him.

Halys climbed to her feet as well. “That’s difficult when you don’t know who friend or foe is.”

Verstappas agreed. There were shadows all around Talia in the palace that could hide any number of enemies. He was glad to have the Tyrhian as an ally. They would fight through this together.

Chapter 22

“A legionnaire hates water,” Basilas said from Gaius’s side.

Water lapped around the pylons of the dock and the sounds of ships making ready echoed throughout the port. Men hauled ropes, sails billowed, and oars cut through the water churning around golden hulls. It all made Gaius’s head hurt.

There was a pounding at the base of his skull and behind his eyes. He hadn’t slept much since before the legion reached Gura and had yet to reflect on their victory over Zagros outside the city. The Fifteenth had survived, but there was much work to do still to quell the remaining rebels.

Gaius rubbed his eyes and then looked at his friend.

“You’re afraid of water now too?”

Basilas smiled in the way he always did, mouth creeping up one side of his face. “I was quoting Attalus. I believe he said it when he cleared Pulliam of barbarians.”

“Ah,” Gaius said with a nod. “I should’ve known. I’m the Belgadan here.”

“They didn’t test you when you became a noble?”

“I was born a noble.” Gaius threw a side-eyed look at his friend. “And Attalus was crossing the Attal in the north.”

Basilas released his grin and scrunched his mouth to the other side of his face, feigning skepticism.

It felt good for Gaius to have his friend close to him. The Fifteenth had almost found disaster with them apart. The general's strategy had been misplaced and it had nearly cost them the war.

"I'll fly forward to the van at midmorning. What did the scouts bring back at first light?" Gaius asked.

"What you would expect: Zagros flees to the Sarissa Hills."

"He's got a long way to go." Gaius stepped to the end of the pier overlooking Gura's ports. He could see across the flowing river to the west and south and the long reach of the morning sun scorched the arid landscape. No movement could be seen on the terrain.

After his defeat, Zagros had crossed north of Gura and then burned the lone bridge to keep the Fifteenth from pursuing. Gaius had let his men rest before attacking the port to commandeer Gura's vessels. That had proved easy, thankfully. But there was still much effort needed to get his men across. They were losing time.

He turned back to Basilas.

"What do you make of the news from the capital this morning about the Seventh Legion?" Gaius asked, facing Basilas once more.

"They won't reach us in time." Basilas raised his eyebrows and half rolled his eyes.

They'd received a message from the palace stating the Seventh Legion under the command of Barnabus Vasili would march from their station between Tilina and Carnassus to assist with the civil war. The orders had been sent weeks ago and were only now reaching the Fifteenth. The reinforcing legion would already be on the move. But he suspected Basilas had the right of things with his initial assessment.

“I see the empress’s thinking,” Gaius said. “We can use them to encircle Zagros in the hills if it comes to that.”

“We needed them here a week ago to help with Gura, but not now.”

The prima captain’s eyes were down and Gaius’s now all-too-familiar worries gripped his chest. Naturally, there had been times in their past where the two friends had disagreed. Very rarely did it affect the command of their troops, but Gaius felt his feet on the edge of a sheer cliff at the moment.

Basilas doubted his general. He strayed from the cause. He doubted the ability for the loyalists to gain victory. Gaius knew all this without the prima captain having to say a word.

“I was wrong to split us up,” the general said. “I was wrong to leave you in the north.”

Basilas glanced up. His eyes were plagued by heavy bags underneath them. Gaius was sure his own face was a similar image of fatigue.

“You needed to cover the whole river. I understand your thinking,” Basilas said.

Gaius suspected his friend didn’t mean the words. But the general didn’t know what else to say. He had to worry about getting the soldiers across the river and his vanguard finding Zagros’s trail and then catching up to the rebels before they could disappear into the Sarissa Hills. He’d have to ponder the issue of Basilas’s mindset in the background and hope to the Infinities that a solution would appear.

Memories from the battle outside Gura still smoldered for Gaius. He’d fallen from Volgus’s back. His mount had saved him, but Gaius had felt death leering before his face. The end had been so close for both himself and the Fifteenth and his trusty war beast.

Gaius shuddered. Basilas didn't notice the motion. The prima captain was back to observing the golden ships that they'd commandeered from the Gurians and would soon board.

"I'm glad the citizens retreated at the sight of Zagros's defeat," Gaius said, seeking to push their conversation to a productive distraction.

Basilas merely nodded.

So much for a diversion. Maybe action would help.

"Let's get First Company on the boats. You'll be first across, like it should be." Gaius hoped the traditional position of the company would help settle Basilas's mind.

"Yes, sir," the prima captain said with a stiff salute. He then marched down the pier to leave Gaius alone with the water gurgling underneath his feet.

With a sigh, the general forced himself to focus on the order of his march. The vanguard, including the demigryph cavalry, were already pressing west and seeking to harass Zagros's rear. Basilas would follow in the first wave of ships. Gaius would put as much of the Second in the hulls as he could as well. It would take multiple trips and the full legion would wait to consolidate on the far side to march southwest along the enemy's trail.

He looked up at the sky and reached out through his bond for his mount. Volgus circled nearby, ready as ever.

The loyalists had the rebels on the back foot, Gaius reminded himself. They'd won a victory, however little it felt like progress. Gaius needed to keep his head high and push his men onward. He put his back to the far bank and marched down the pier, ready to distribute more orders and get his army moving again.

* * *

“I observed plenty of wild nests and younglings. The northern population, at least of the lesser variety, appears healthy.” Solos smiled around the table. It appeared to Talia as if he expected his audience to break out into applause. No one did. “I believe this means we’ll be able to replenish our stables from any mounts lost to the civil war once we’ve gained victory.”

At least someone was an optimist on her council.

“Thank you, Stable Master. I’m glad you returned from your trip safely,” Consul Ecbas said.

Talia hadn’t expected much from the flight north, but she still felt disappointed when there was no news of Oxus. Any information would have been welcome while she sat in the palace and did nothing. They gained nothing from Solos’s trip. But at least her gryphon keeper was back to help monitor the other council members.

Talia kept her head forward though she watched Captain Pythias closely with the corner of her eye. Verstappas had relayed his theory that the senate guardsmen planted the idea to fly north and search for Oxus in order to clear out one of Talia’s closest advisors.

As much as the empress wanted to push paranoia away, thoughts like these from her trusted advisors made her mind devolve into an unstable state. She thought there was the hint of a smirk on Pythias’s face now, but she couldn’t be sure. Any of the senators and consuls around the table now

could be allied with Pythias and in on his schemes. Or none of them were and everything Talia saw lurking in the shadows was wrong.

“I have word from the Seventh that they are marching past Carnassus and making all haste to Gaius’s rear,” Ecbas said, moving the discussion along.

“The latest update from Gaius has the Fifteenth moving at speed as well,” Verstappas said.

“I wasn’t aware of this message.” Pagus jolted upright in his chair.

“I wasn’t either.” Ecbas glared between Verstappas and Talia.

Her council meetings were full of useless tension that wore on Talia. The senators and consuls both found a way to be offended at every turn and acted as if they were shut off from her.

“It only just arrived today, Consuls.” Verstappas kept his voice level.

“And what were the details?” Ecbas spat the question, always impatient. “Zagros retreats still?”

“Let the guardsman finish, Consul. Please.” Talia added the last word with effort.

Halys had cautioned her to use a friendly tone in these meetings. The advice was sound, if a little hypocritical coming from the Tyrhian, who’d remained silent for the entire meeting. Talia saw the foreign captain shifting in her stance against the far wall.

Ecbas obeyed the request from the empress. Verstappas continued.

“They’re chasing Zagros. The legion moves farther west by the day and will soon have him hemmed against the Sarissa Hills.”

“Then my son isn’t needed. His troops can return to their station in the east,” Senator Vasili cut in.

“I don’t think the campaign is assuredly won. The Infinities may have a new twist for our empire’s defenders.”

“I dis—” Vasili raised his voice but was cut off. The Tyrhian had finally had enough.

“Heed your commander’s words, old man. He speaks the truth.” Halys pushed off her wall and stepped to the table. Vasili was opposite her but still jumped back and nearly toppled in his chair.

The other nobles had startled as well and even Pythias held a frown. Talia had to fight off a smile.

“On my ship, I wouldn’t tolerate any of your words,” Halys continued. “You don’t serve a purpose except to weigh this palace down.”

The Tyrhian captain opened her mouth to continue but then seemed to remember the boundaries Talia had set for her. She faltered, realizing her mistakes all at once, and clamped her mouth back shut.

Talia would’ve grinned, had another outburst not come from the other side.

“Is this how you run your empire, Empress?” Ecbas asked. He stood up and shouted the words with a finger pointed at Halys, though he seemed scared to look directly at the Tyrhian.

Talia cleared her throat. “My apologies, Councilors. Captain Halys is still learning our ways. I must admit I understand where she’s coming from, having seen her country firsthand. We must seem very slow to her, especially in the face of such threats.”

Verstappas still stared at the table, his brow creased in worry. This was a problematic hole Talia had expected to find herself in at some point. She now needed to climb out of it quickly or she’d have even more danger on her hands across the council.

“Captain Halys,” Talia addressed her newest advisor as calmly as possible. “Please step back and we’ll finish this meeting. I’ll explain the senator’s concerns later. For now, Senator Vasili has the floor and we’ll continue our discussion.”

Talia sat. Halys receded, but her glare seemed to strike out of her shadowy corner like a waiting viper. Senator Vasili glanced after the Tyrhian for a moment and then back at his fellow council members with wide, worried eyes.

“Any more details on the rebel use of the Sarissa barbarians?” the man asked eventually. His voice was hoarse.

“None from the recent report,” Verstappas answered quickly, happy for a different topic to focus on. “I believe our guess is as good as General Gaius’s for how Zagros allied with them. We must wait for more information.”

The Vasili patriarch glanced toward the coiled stare of Halys once more and didn’t push any further. No further topics were brought up from the others present either. Talia had lost this audience. She decided to press on another touchy matter, thinking her status couldn’t devolve to anything worse.

“Our grain storage has improved after our purchases from the Tilians, but distribution to the poor tenements is lower than I’d hoped.” Talia looked at Consul Pagus. “I’ve heard reports, unconfirmed but worrisome nonetheless, of nobles receiving more grain than we’ve rationed.”

“Preposterous,” Pagus said far too quickly and with barely a glance up the table.

Talia better understood each of these men before her now after weeks with them in the palace. Whether they schemed to steal her throne or fully

supported her, she needed the skill of seeing through their smiles and bright eyes and colorful words to the core of their goals.

The empress had not asked a question, only made a statement about the grain stores. Pagus responded eagerly and sought to shove the ideas behind Talia's words away from himself. He might as well have stood up and admitted his own corruption.

Talia thought she could see a sparkle pass across Halys's eyes over the men between them. The pair had discussed this very topic together and the empress chose to strike where the Tyrhian had advised her to.

"I've instructed our record keepers to audit our most recent shipments," Talia said. "I hope they won't find any misplacements or errors from here on out."

Pagus nodded. Talia had given him an out, but he wouldn't have room for another round of corruption, whether mistaken or purposeful.

The room quieted once more and the empress couldn't help but notice that Consul Ecbas was now eyeing her. She may have betrayed her hand too bluntly when dealing with Vasili. This second consul was smarter than the first, and a more dangerous opponent. He narrowed his eyes and then skirted a knowing look to Halys in the corner. Talia glared right back at him.

Pythias stood up after a few moments and passed along a full update from the senate. He asked, as usual, for more money to pay his guards and to recruit new warriors from the city and the legions. He was always aggrieved to note the Imperial Aptorians held double the budget to protect one person, compared to the two hundred senators that were under his group's charge.

“The budget is set, Captain.” Verstappas looked up from the table and met his opposite’s hard glare with one of his own.

It appeared fire could burst between these two from the intensity of their stares. Thankfully, weapons weren’t allowed during council meetings, not that Verstappas ever carried a blade. This was more important for Halys. Talia was sure the Tyrhian would’ve shoved a spear through Pythias long ago if she could.

The empress adjourned the meeting and sent everyone on their way. The tension across the group would not ease and there was nothing productive about continuing the arguments. Talia wanted to talk with Verstappas and Halys on their own.

“Apologies, Princess,” the Tyrhian said immediately after the room had cleared.

“We can’t have that, Halys,” Verstappas said.

Talia shook her head while staring at the floor. She was tired and wanted to lie down. Her bed was a long way away and it was only early afternoon besides. There was no rest with the issues facing her reign.

“Let us focus on the future and how we can mold it,” Talia said.

Her father had spoken those words to his own advisors once long ago. Talia had been observing the meeting of his council in peacetime. It was a much simpler era for Belgada.

“Let us push forward, past what is done and said,” she added for her own twist on the instructions.

Halys bowed her head in deference, a foreign-looking gesture for her normally strong posture. The captain truly was trying her hardest to help.

“We need to be careful, Princess.” Verstappas stood up between the two women.

Talia looked down at the brightly polished wood of the grand council table and said nothing in response.

“Something is stirring,” Verstappas added. “They will act soon.”

“And who is ‘they?’” Talia asked, unable to hide the frustrated grating behind the words. “Pythias most likely, but who else? Vasili? Ecbas? All of them together and all at once?”

“I don’t know, Princess.” Verstappas’s voice was quiet, defeated.

“It’s often wise to fool an enemy ship,” Halys offered. Her voice was cautious at first, still tame from being scolded by Talia earlier, but then picked up to her normal momentum and strength. “Without knowing your enemy fully, you must draw in their ship. Act weak, make them overconfident, feign damage or aloofness. Then strike.”

Talia thought over these words for a moment. She certainly felt like a broken ship, drifting helplessly on the seas. She’d been a captive before in just such a vessel and Halys had attacked and taken her from Bardylis’s rebels.

Could a ruse draw out her enemies within the palace?

“I’ve already been weak in front of the other councilors,” Talia said. “Ruse or no, that play is already in motion.”

“No, you’ve led well.” Verstappas’s shield arm flexed along with his anger.

“Not to their eyes,” Halys said, stepping around the hulking Scipian.

Verstappas’s scowl slackened. The Tyrhian had a point.

“How can we use that to our advantage and draw Pythias into a rash action?” Talia said. Then, after another moment’s thought, she answered her own question. “We continue our course and let him act when he thinks we’re weak.”

Both the Tyrhian and Scipian stayed silent. They agreed. Talia's heart was pounding even though she'd barely moved in her chair.

"Think through what needs to be done, from each of us, Solos included." Talia spoke the words as decisively as she could muster. "Then come back to me and we'll form a full plan."

The advisors bowed and left together. The pair fit well together, walking side by side. Talia had to smile at the image and the thoughts were a welcome distraction.

But once she was alone, her doubts settled around her.

She pushed past them by thinking on Air Captain Martius. The latest reports had positioned the Fifteenth in Gura but about to cross the Gura and head west, farther from the capital and Talia's palace.

What would the young rider advise her to do if he were here? What would he see in the scowls of her advisors?

Martius and the legion fought against a clear enemy, someone who fought in formation with weapons pointed back at them. Talia had to watch shadows that flickered and disappeared the more she focused on them. Her battle was more difficult, though the entire empire depended on them both.

Talia settled on an answer to her own questions once more. Martius would advise her the same as Verstappas and Halys both. The empress needed to be decisive.

Pythias may not see her as strong, but that would allow him to walk into her trap unaware. Talia would prove him wrong, and she would lead with strength, just the way Martius would want her to.

Chapter 23

Martius and Avorian drifted north with wings wide and the wind whistling through outstretched feathers. The rider sat tall in the saddle, his hair blowing behind him. He looked down at the remnants of the battlefield from the Fifteenth's stand against Zagros and the trail of debris from the rebel retreat.

That was the past. The legion's future lay in the west along with the echoes of ancient history.

The book on the Memnas Campaign was safe in his saddlebag behind his right leg. Once the Fifteenth was across the river, they would be fully in the realm of that story. Martius could hardly believe he would see this legendary land.

General Curia had marched in this same direction, though crossing at a point farther north and fighting a far different enemy. The rider still felt the fine cloak of history wrapping around him as Avorian banked to send them west.

This comfort combined with the lifting surge from the victory outside Gura. Martius's spirit lifted higher. He no longer dwelt on bloody, threatening spears. They would deal with Goras and Hoplas when the time came. The Fifteenth would destroy them.

Avorian flapped his wings and picked up his speed, passing over the river and shooting out over the ends of the desert. Martius's fingers itched

on the reins. He longed to snap their flight southwest and fly to find the fleeing rebels immediately. But he held steady.

The land here was rolling hills with vegetation clinging to slopes that fended off the end of Gura's sand. The legion was set to march across the last stretches of soft-soiled dunes. They'd finally be free of this dreadful place.

General Curia and his legendary legions had pushed across the north along the coast and found the enemy Locrians waiting for them outside of Memnas. Glory descended on them and the empire started its road to salvation and revenge after the disasters of Cabiri and the second Locrian War. Martius felt his opportunity, one and the same with the famous Curia, stretching before him.

Avorian turned away from the horizon and flew them back to Gura. The Fifteenth ferried itself across the wide river. It would be at least evening before everyone crossed and the march wouldn't begin until the following morning.

The legion was completely exhausted from all the marching and fighting. There would be no rest. They needed to chase Zagros and Goras and finish the fight.

In the rider's book, General Curia was adept at motivation. The legendary general pushed his men to the end of their ability and beyond in his victories against the Locrian Khora. Like with all great men from history, Martius could learn much from his example.

His desire to read had returned to him in force the previous evening. Even with the heavy fatigue of battle hanging from him, he'd read a chapter in the Memnas book by firelight while the army rested and regrouped. His

mind was free and there now seemed to be more space for his thoughts to focus and roam and absorb.

He now felt loose, his thoughts flowing easily and he was better able to recall specific passages from both the Memnas story and other books he'd read long ago.

An idea smacked into him like an arrow.

He jolted upright in the saddle, wishing he could pull the book out and flip to the passage rearing up within his mind at that very moment. Alas, flying on a gryphon made reading challenging. But he'd read through the campaign so many times that he could picture the passage. He knew the events by heart.

Avorian's feathers and fur bristled with excitement at feeling the idea building within his rider. Martius could motivate the legionnaires just like Curia. They could start this next phase of the campaign on a strong foot, bringing forward the echoes of history for every loyalist warrior.

Martius leaned low over the saddle and loosed Avorian to full speed. They barreled back to the legion as it crossed the river. The gryphon dropped low, skimming over the sand and around a grove of gnarly desert trees. He landed on the western bank of the Gura as another wave of legionnaires rowed ashore from the transport boats. The hostile city loomed on the far bank, standing over the Belgadans like a memory that wouldn't leave a troubled mind.

General Gaius was freshly disembarked from a golden-hulled river skiff with a wide, flat deck. He directed his soldiers outward from their landing position. A legionary camp had already been established just off the sandy bank and the soldiers marched into positions to assist with expansion work.

Martius dismounted, pulled the history book from his saddle bag, and waited for the general to finish his latest round of orders.

“Relieve Basilas’s outriders when they return. Distribute the rest of your men on wall duty. I want a wide perimeter and everyone to be ready to move quickly in the morning.” Gaius directed his commands to Captains Megaras and Graccus. The rest of the gathering consisted of aides and messengers. Volgus sat on his haunches nearby with his eyes gazing longingly at the sky.

“No sign of tricks from Zagros, General,” Graccus said.

“Still, we must be vigilant.” Gaius shook his head, as if throwing away an idea he didn’t want within his mind. He looked back across the river. “We won’t all make it across until this evening. Keep working on the camp and then we’ll march after them.”

The gathering around the general dispersed, including the two company captains. More legionnaires disembarked by the moment and the transport crafts tacked back to the eastern shore for another load.

“Sir,” Martius said, giving a quick salute.

“Martius.” The general looked happy to see him. “Walk with me.”

The rider fell in beside Gaius and they strode past Volgus and moved along the southern border of the legion’s new camp. The general’s mount kept his eyes on the sky, pointedly ignoring his rider in a show of displeasure and boredom. Avorian misjudged the posture and trotted in a circle around the great gryphon, starting in close and then skipping away in an attempt to induce play from the mature mount.

Ignoring his gryphon, Martius opened his mouth to relay his idea from the Memnas campaign.

“Volgus is always uptight,” Gaius said before Martius could start. “He could learn a thing or two from your gryphon.”

The general stared at the ground while he walked. There were sappers on their right mapping out what would become the foundation for the rear wall for the camp. Hammering hummed in the background as Gaius continued.

“How was the battle for you? Did Avorian come into danger?”

“We were fine, sir,” Martius said. “The rebel Goras seems to have it out for us, but we managed. Avorian always holds his own.”

Gaius scratched at his chin. “I trust he always will. Volgus and I had a run-in with Naxos. I was separated from the saddle momentarily.”

Martius startled and looked at his general. There hadn’t been a debrief on any topics following the latest victory. He was shocked to hear Gaius was even in the middle of the gryphon duels and not commanding on the ground.

“I experienced something I’d only heard of from other riders.” Gaius chuckled to himself, as if he didn’t believe his own words. Martius listened intently, his original reason for seeking out the general momentarily forgotten. “When I lost my grip on Volgus, he was locked claw to claw with Naxos. I saw everything clearly. Time was frozen like an epic painting.” The general paused and shook his head.

“Perhaps you’re misremembering, sir. Imagination can run away with fear or adrenaline,” Martius said. He was thinking of how he pictured events in books like the Memnas records or tales about Harpalus’s generals. He could always see the action clearly, like it was etched over his eyes with vivid colors.

“No, this is different. Volgus has the memories too. I’m sorry, I wish I could explain. Even to myself it’s unclear.” Gaius stopped. Martius faced his general. Hammers cracked and saws droned all around them. “I saw things through Volgus’s eyes and my own as I flailed in the air. My bond with my gryphon saved me. Volgus kicked away from a superior position over Naxos and came to my aid.”

Martius understood partly what the general was getting at now. If Volgus could’ve taken down the rebel great gryphon, the Fifteenth’s victory would’ve been that much stronger. But a mount was never going to let his rider fall. Unless their bond wasn’t strong...

A memory of Bardylis’s rebels flying over Arta and Getae flared within Martius’s head. Those gryphon bonds had been forced. They were stolen. The beasts didn’t mourn when their riders fell into the water below.

Gaius released a long exhale, almost muttering to himself through loose lips. “Volgus and I are tight. Our bond saved us. You and Avorian are the same way.”

Martius nodded. He waited in silence for the general to continue.

“That is the difference between Belgada and the other kingdoms. It’s the difference between the rebels and us. I don’t know much about Zagros or Goras and their bonds—and perhaps their gryphons would rush to save them as well—but I have strong doubts the Infinities would bless them with the connection I have with Volgus. That is why we’ll survive. That’s how we’ll be victorious.”

“Yes, sir.” Martius believed and agreed with the opinion. It was clear the general grasped for things he couldn’t quite get a hold of.

The legion was on a precipice. They embarked on a new great march. Their campaign was one for the very soul of the empire.

“Metellus Curia talked in much the same way about his bond with Pilos.” Martius held out the book. This was his opening to transition to his idea. “I’ve been reading about the Memnas Campaign. There’s much to learn from his letters and the record of the proceedings. Have you read them? Do you know what he did upon crossing the Gura at the start of the war?”

Gaius blinked twice and then held Martius’s gaze with a hard stare of his own. His lip twitched upward as understanding dawned on him.

The rider let the general piece the full idea together himself. Gaius looked to the east as a new wave of golden transports packed with legionnaires thrust from the city’s port. He stuck his tongue in the side of his mouth and then nodded.

“I like it,” he said. “What do we have to lose?”

Martius smiled. “Nothing. It’ll be a grand spectacle. Then we’ll crush Zagros and these horrid rebels.”

* * *

Night descended and flames flickered up to the sky. Crackling sounded from the golden hulls of the ships before smoke billowed forth as the last sappers dived off the decks into the water. The flames lurched higher and soon reached the top of the masts and the boats listed and sank, never to sail again.

Gaius watched it all from the shore with his men arrayed about him. Martius’s idea had made sense to him initially before he’d written it off as a

farce that his veterans would see through. But it only took a quick glance around him to observe the sparkling flames in the legionnaires' eyes and the effect it cast over their minds.

First, it felt good to burn something from Gura. The city hadn't been kind to the soldiers and stealing their boats for only a mere crossing didn't seem a harsh enough punishment for the citizens.

Utterly destroying their precious golden fleet was much more appropriate.

Second, the act of decimating the ships and cutting off the possibility of retreat held historical and spiritual significance for the Belgadans. Metellus Curia, the legendary source of Martius's idea, had demonstrated the dire nature of his war at the very beginning of his army's march. Most of Gaius's legionnaires would know the story from their boyhood days and would treat the act as legend and inspiration.

This was a cathartic message, the scorching of the soul to remove bruises and scar tissue. The legion would be cleansed and ready to march across more desert and into a new land. They would hunt down Zagros. There would be no retreat from the next battle. There could only be victory.

"We can still get back across the river," someone said to Gaius's left.

The general, along with Basilas and Martius and the other officers present, slowly turned to look at who'd broken the scene. It was Anshas, naturally. He seemed to startle at the sudden attention thrown at him and gave a sheepish shrug.

"We just march north," he said. "There are other bridges, not to mention a port for us to sail home."

"It's a symbol, Anshas." Basilas glared at the air captain then returned to looking at the magnificent flaming boats on the river water.

The first spear's words lifted Gaius the same as the burning boats buoyed the spirits of his men. Basilas had been mostly silent throughout the afternoon and during the crossing activity.

But Gaius now believed his friend was coming around from their earlier disagreement. Time could wear down any impasse between friends. Basilas was close and the general needed to make the final move to solidify their position before the march began.

"This was a good idea, Martius." Gaius looked to his other side and grinned at the young air captain. Clavius rested a hand in agreement on the boy's shoulder.

"Thank you. I fear Anshas is right, though." The rider looked at the full legion observing the beautiful show in parade formation. "Hopefully this will still help the men."

"It will," Gaius said. He was pleased to see a nod come from Basilas.

The general meant his words. His doubts had evaporated like the smoke now clouding the Gurian sky. The Fifteenth had survived and would fight on. They would be rid of this terrible place. They would chase Zagros to the Fort of Acab or the Sarissa Hills or even to the peaks of Cyna if needed.

The ships took their time sinking and a few broke from their anchors and drifted north with the river's flow. One ran aground on the bank just north on the legion's side and smoldered. Others drifted back against the city walls or continued past the remnants of the battlefield days previous, cracking and popping and illuminating portions of the desert banks.

The legionnaires weren't in a hurry, but eventually drifted back into their camp for a short night's rest. Gaius walked from the shore with Basilas at his side. They stayed silent for much of their short journey.

“I’ll lead the men of the company out in the morning,” Basilas said at last. “We’ll make good time and catch the rebels.”

They stopped in the middle of their command area and Gaius felt a strong pull toward his tent and the sleep it would offer.

“Thank you, Prima Captain.” The general reached out and gripped his friend’s shoulder. “I apologize again for my strategy during the last fight. I won’t split you from us again.”

“I understand, sir.”

The last word from his friend cut through what Gaius had assumed was a new, firm foundation between them. When Basilas addressed him formally, it meant something else was on the first spear’s mind. He dwelt on reservations. Doubts still plagued him.

Fortunately for Gaius, Martius’s burning ships had spurred more thoughts from history for the general.

“There’s a story from Belgada’s founding,” Gaius said as he released Basilas’s shoulder. “Belgadus and Demeter settled our city after fleeing the south. Their strength sustained the early republic and laid the foundation for our empire.”

Basilas grinned, a thrown-away expression accompanied by a scoff.

“I’m the one with the parables,” he said. He pointed at his own chest. “Tulisian, remember?”

Gaius smiled but pushed on with his story.

“Harpalus’s surviving commanders fought. All were strong. But they killed each other, pulling themselves back to the depths of barbarism. Only a few survived, and only one remnant of the descendent kingdoms still remains: Belgada. Do you know why?” Gaius asked.

Basilas shook his head, though he still offered an answer. “Belgadus was a great gryphon, the first of the war mounts. He carried Harpalus himself into battle.”

“True, but not correct.” Gaius looked up at the stars poking through the haze from the fires. “Belgadus was noble, certainly. Harpalus was great and heroic and conquered every bit of his world. He’s deserving of his legend. But Demeter was the survivor. Demeter is the supreme ancestor of the men in this legion.”

Gaius let the words hang between them for a moment. Basilas had his head cocked. His grin drifted from his face.

“Demeter was the true noble,” Gaius continued. “He escaped the fighting. He persevered. The warrior doubted and worried and cared for his gryphon first, then the people he would come to lead. I care for Volgus. I care for my friends.” Gaius made sure to hold Basilas’s eyes with his stare. “That’s how we’ll prevail over Zagros, even if he has triple the men we do.”

Basilas chuckled. “Did you get a new estimate on his numbers?”

“No.” Gaius laughed as well. “That was an exaggeration, but we could handle it.”

Basilas nodded, a breakthrough forming. He smiled a full smile and straightened his head.

“Demeter founded more than Belgada, you know,” the prima captain said.

“Are you lecturing me now?” Gaius felt momentum growing like legionnaires pushing through an enemy shield wall. “I’ve passed your tests before.”

“No, seriously.” Basilas waved away the comment. “My old home focused on Fate, a predetermined future that they aligned with. Demeter and

Belgadus cut through all that.”

A spark of an idea lit within Gaius’s mind. Basilas had something there. The water reflecting the burning of the Gurian boats simmered and joined with it and he launched into words strung together quickly.

“True. We make our own luck, always have. Demeter threw away omens and followed the Infinities, a relic of the tribes he united around his new settlement. But he discerned the truth of the matter: his people could make their own luck. They needed no gods, no higher power. Only themselves.”

Basilas flicked his hand out as if to cast away Gaius’s words. “Easy to say, harder to—”

“Do.” Gaius cut his friend off and didn’t let go of the high ground he’d fought so hard for. “But we’re capable.” Gaius pointed back to the flames over the water and then the legionnaires stretching up the beach. “Our army pushes through obstacles. Your brave legionnaires conquer everything. Belgada will prevail.”

Basilas was silent for a few moments and Gaius allowed his friend to dwell on his words.

“That’s your parable?” the prima captain said at last.

“Yes. How was it?”

“Needed some rehearsing. The delivery was slow.”

“Ah, I’ll work on that.”

Both men chuckled and Gaius rubbed at his forehead. There was already a tension releasing there and he hoped Basilas felt the same. The general believed in his words. He believed in the history and themes of the empire. It’s why they kept fighting, why they strayed so close to the edge of madness and bloodlust.

“You could’ve brought up the maze at Epirus,” Basilas said.

“The one Harpalus cut through?” Gaius didn’t follow.

“That was the beginning of Demeter’s belief in his men and their cause. Harpalus didn’t rely on Fate or even his cunning for that trial.”

“No, he tore through the walls to reach the exit. He made his own path.” Gaius huffed after his words. That was a good story. Basilas was certainly better at connecting morals than the general.

“I’m sorry for my sulking,” Basilas said.

“Don’t apologize.”

“Let’s make sure the men rest,” Basilas continued, both men pushing forward. “And go after the rebels hard in the morning.”

“I like that plan. Thank you, Basilas, for everything.”

“Thank you, sir.” A spark appeared behind the Tulisian’s dark eyes at his mocking use of the formal address. Their old camaraderie was back in full.

Chapter 24

Verstappas awoke before first light and took his breakfast alone. The Aptorian quarters were quiet, with his fellow guardsmen either still sleeping or on night duty outside the empress's chambers. The Scipian ate three strips of dried meat from the stores and briefly considered heating an egg in the hearth but decided against the effort of kindling the fire.

With his stomach complaining, he made his way down to the training grounds. The sun was just appearing around the hills and the taller buildings of the capital and the sparring circles were awash with long shadows and growing golden light. Verstappas carried only his shield and moved to the central circle and set down the weapon and proceeded through his stretching.

It was only then that the men waiting in the shadows made their move.

A scraping sound gave away the first presence. Verstappas didn't stiffen or startle. He continued with his flowing warm-up, bending his knees and pulling his arms above and behind his head and feeling his joints crack. They'd planned for this. He understood what this day would bring.

Pythias strode through the shadows and stopped at the edge of Verstappas's circle. He passed a whetstone one more time along his blade and then dropped it into the dirt. The sharp weapon's metal glimmered against the rising sun.

"Is this your coup?" Verstappas said. He ceased his stretching and came to rest with his legs apart and hands clasped before him. His shield

remained at his feet.

“It is indeed. Here at last.” Pythias spun his sword and brought out his own shield from his back. It was a smaller, square object, not as cumbersome as the giant standard legionnaire weapons, but still quite different from Verstappas’s own.

“I thought you’d have more allies.” Verstappas kept his head forward but watched the shadows in his periphery. He counted only a handful of senate guardsmen with their leader.

“I only need myself.” Pythias crossed into the circle. He pointed his sword at the Scipian.

Both men were ready to finally fight.

Verstappas had been quietly observing Pythias’s training for years, as had the senate guardsmen from the opposite side. But warriors who watched Verstappas fight without a shield always wrote him off as weak and easy.

Pythias, far more than most men, was filled with hubris. He thought himself unbeatable even when fighting an armed opponent. Belgadans were always overconfident and the senate guardsmen had men in support with Verstappas seemingly trapped. The enemy felt victory was all but assured.

The Aptorian stooped and picked up his shield. He lowered himself behind the circle and waited for his attacker to make the first move. The last break in his concentration came with a glance up at the dark palace high above them. He was confident he could defeat Pythias, but it would take time. What other parts of Pythias’s coup were in motion and was Verstappas’s imperial charge in danger and all alone above him?

* * *

Talia watched the sunrise from the pecan grove terrace. The palace was vast enough that she could find space to herself now, even with the servants and guardsmen and councilmen constantly hovering around her. The morning was the best time for her to think. If she wasn't flying with Axias, she preferred to spend the early hours up here in the quiet open air.

It was a peaceful start to a day that would be far from calm.

The creaking of a door pricked Talia's ear. She cocked her head and then turned, observing the senate guards file out onto the terrace. They spread and pushed under the grove canopy, hands on hilts and shoulders tense.

The empress waited for them on the lip of the wall. The sheer drop off of the palace hill waited behind her. She thought to reach for the knife concealed within her dressing gown but stayed her hand for now. Her attackers were almost in position.

A ray of new sun cast its brightness across the scene. Consul Ecbas's face came into focus, illuminated as he stepped forward. He smiled at his prey. Belgada never wanted for rebels and usurpers.

Despite herself, Talia's shoulders shook. She'd worried about her reaction to the danger when it came. She thought she'd be ready, but nerves and fears still gripped her tight. On Tyrha, she'd faced down a king and an entire island of warriors. She'd flown in battle above the barbarian island. But here, she felt alone and exposed.

“Come with us, Princess,” the consul said. He adopted the same tone he always used in their council meetings, as if he wasn’t demanding for her to step away from her father’s throne and give up power willingly.

“I’ve been waiting for you, Consul.” Talia looked at the armed guards arrayed before her. She’d been wondering who Ecbas’s allies were, but he only had nameless guardsmen with him for this part of his plan. It was notable they were all from the senate guard, however. “Are you setting Bardylis free?”

The consul smiled. “Yes. He’s the one to bring stability back to the capital.”

Talia’s eyes narrowed at the word *stability*. She wanted to snap back at the pitiful man in front of her but held her tongue.

“I respected your father, Princess.” Ecbas paced before her with short steps. His warriors held position like statues. “Zagros and even Paulus could have united the Empire, but they struck with the blade and your allies parried. I don’t want to spill Belgada blood, and neither does Bardylis. We can unite the provinces and the people peacefully, for the good of all.”

Talia let the consul talk. She finally found answers to what motivated her councilman and her enemies.

“Your time playing at power is at an end, Princess.” The consul halted and folded his arms as he faced her once more. “I won’t let harm come to you, as long as you order your allies to stand down and give us the palace. The senate can take proceedings from here.”

A couple of guards stepped forward, hands still on their sword hilts.

“Are you abolishing the imperial throne, then? Are we to return to a Republic?”

“No,” Ecbas said quickly. He seemed surprised that Talia had responded at all. “Bardylis is our leader. Noble, capable, strong. He can live up to Attalus’s line.”

“Until you stab him in the back,” Talia said with as much bite behind the words as she could manage.

Ecbas jolted in surprise. Then his eyes narrowed. He fought through his frown and smirked. Talia didn’t give him time for a witty response. She chose to play her hand. The usurpers were out in the open at last.

“You think you understand power,” Talia said. “You’re a senator, elected by the people, but only because of your noble birth. My father fought for the good of the empire, for its people to prosper. Men like you tear it apart.”

She folded her arms in a mirror stance to the conspirator standing before her. She didn’t need her knife to cut at this man’s ego.

“You and Bardylis know nothing of sitting on my father’s throne.” Talia glared at Ecbas. The consul opened his mouth to reply, but Talia batted away the attempt. “Attalus’s line, you say? There’s a key piece to Belgadan power you’ve forgotten, Consul.”

Ecbas cleared his throat. “And what’s that?”

“Attalus’s mount, Gythion, sired Arcas.” Talia smiled as Ecbas’s smirk fell away. The consul realized her ploy but far too late, just as the empress had hoped. “That mount served Emperor Arcelaus well and brought forth multiple offspring. One of those was the great gryphon Axias, of the imperial line. Is Bardylis going to bond with my gryphon?”

A rustling came from behind Talia’s attackers. It was followed by soft cooing. All eyes turned and looked up at the roof of the palace. Sunlight

glimmered from the east and illuminated the hulking form of Axias, finally emerged from her concealment.

The great gryphon spread her wings wide. She gave a piercing caw and then lowered her front claws to the lip of the roof, set her gaze on Ecbas, and launched into attack.

* * *

Pythias hacked down with his sword and followed with a punch from his small shield. Verstappas shoved him away.

The two men separated, with Pythias assessing his opponent through overconfident eyes. The scheming rebel was fighting a man without a weapon, after all.

Verstappas and all the shield bearers that had come before him knew what came from hubris. But Pythias would have to learn the hard way.

The senate guardsman swung, raising his sword and slashing it downward once more. Verstappas stayed behind his shield with his body low and heavy on his legs. He moved as Pythias attacked, blocking each blow seemingly before it happened. There was very little variety in his enemy's blows.

He wished there was time to fully embarrass Pythias. He could let the guardsman tire himself out and mock him as he slowly lost the high ground of hope. Even now, after only a handful of swings, Verstappas could see Pythias's triumph falling from his face.

But Scipians were hardly the mocking type. They were always the superior warrior. They didn't need to gloat to assert their position in the world.

With Pythias attacking Verstappas here, it meant the coup was in motion in the palace hallways above. Talia would be in danger. Verstappas needed to get to her side.

Pythias's sword pinged off the shield once more. Verstappas finally shifted the barrier, directing the blade down and away to send his opponent careening off balance. The senate guardsman stumbled. The Aptorian angled the edge of his shield so Pythias's face cracked down onto it. Verstappas stepped around the blow and let Pythias stagger away. Then he pressed his advantage.

Pythias righted himself as the Aptorian attacked. The enemy raised his sword and Verstappas shoved just under the fruitless parry. The guardsmen toppled easily. He rolled in the dirt, kicking up a cloud, as Verstappas struck down with the shield, finally on the offensive. He made a great swing that cracked into Pythias's back.

The duel would've ended there had the other soldiers not been present.

Pythias's support troops edged closer to the circle. Verstappas had never lost sight of them. He spun and pushed away a spear thrust from a flanking enemy. Another pressed in from the other side and the Scipian had to pivot away, knocking the spear off course with his free hand's wrist guard.

Only two of the enemies had entered the circle, but Pythias regained his footing to make the fight three on one. Those were still favorable odds to a Scipian.

Pythias twirled his sword as he stalked forward and his allies spread out to hem in their prey. The Scipian didn't feel movement to his rear, but he

knew the other guardsmen outside the circle would attack the moment he bested these three. He didn't count the enemies, but there were enough to give him pause.

A screaming war cry echoed across the training ground. The soldiers startled. Verstappas smiled as the blur of a spear cut through two outer guardsmen before they could react. Pythias stumbled backwards, head whipping around at the frenzied attack. Halys had joined the fray.

"We've been waiting for you, Pythias," Verstappas said. It was as close to gloating as he would ever get. He wasn't even out of breath and now had an unstoppable spear woman at his side.

"Take her down!" Pythias pointed with his sword and the soldiers around the circle converged on Halys's position. The Tyrhian, spinning and cartwheeling and thrusting, would hold her own against all of them.

Two spearmen on Verstappas's flanks snapped out of their surprise and lunged together. The Scipian stepped into their attack, shocking his opponents and sending their thrusts off target. Pythias came in and brought his sword low, but the Scipian lifted a leg to take the blade on his shin guards. He then punched Pythias in the face.

His nose crunched and he fell once more. Verstappas knocked a spear out of another enemy's hand with a shield swipe before ducking under the final guard's thrust. From the low position, he brought his shield around and took out this last warrior's legs before striking down with the rounded edge at the man's throat.

He stepped back behind his shield. The other enemy pressed, two quick thrusts pinging off metal. Verstappas drew this soldier forward before twisting into attack once more. He executed an uppercut from the shield

that lifted the guardsman off his feet. The next motion was a strike down with the sharpened edge.

All of this happened in the blink of an eye. Pythias was only just now getting to his feet from his earlier stumble.

The cowardly guard was alone once more. Halys tore apart the rebels outside the circle. Pythias turned his head to watch the Tyrhian fighting, blinking in disbelief. Verstappas used this opening to end their affair.

He lunged aggressively, overextending in the way Scipians in training were taught to avoid. Pythias twisted back straight as the shield cracked into his face. Blood exploded from his mouth and nose, but the enemy stayed upright. The guardsman desperately swung both shield and sword at the same time. Verstappas knocked away the blade and let the shield strike him in the shoulder. He didn't flinch at the blow. Dropping to one knee, he dodged the rash follow-up. He grabbed Pythias's leg and yanked. The defeated enemy flipped and hit the ground for the final time.

Verstappas rose, hands flexing. Pythias lifted his sword and the Scipian slapped it away. Verstappas then stepped on the man's neck. He didn't hesitate to swing his shield down into the man's already bloodied face with a mortal, ending blow.

The Scipian exhaled. His heart rate was barely elevated.

He didn't wait and study his victory. He dreamed of that strike a long time. But this wasn't a dream.

He turned to provide aid to Halys, only to find the warrior didn't need it. She was done with her own duels, merely standing with her legs wide and arms crossed, watching Verstappas with an eyebrow raised.

"I thought they'd be better fighters," she said.

Verstappas only grunted in reply. An involuntary grin crept outward from his mouth.

He looked up at the palace and debated their next move. They needed to get to Talia, unless the empress was already coming for them on the back of Axias. His decision was made for him as a flight of gryphons appeared around the northern edge of the palace and dived down toward their location.

“Are those allies?” Halys asked. “I can maybe take down one gryphon, but if there’s many more, we’d be in trouble.”

“Make ready,” Verstappas said while hefting his shield up his arm. He hadn’t taken his eyes off the approaching war beasts.

* * *

Ecbas yelled. The noise, more a squeal than a scream, was cut off by Axias knocking the consul away with a sweeping wing. The commotion was too fast for Talia to fully follow, but she was sure none of the guardsmen got their blades drawn before they were thrown aside too. Axias struck down the line with wing and claw. She snapped at the shoulder of the last guardsman with her beak and tossed the screaming man across the grove and clear over the lip of the terrace.

The imperial war beast rounded and snarled back up the way she’d come. Claws ripped apart guardsmen on the ground and her back legs swung around to kick two more men against the palace wall. One attacker managed to stand, his blade coming free, but Axias lowered her head and

barreled straight through him. She flung the assailant upward and over the walls and disappeared onto the building's roof.

Talia hadn't moved and she was surprised to see Ecbas stand up close by her position. The consul shook his head, then drew out a knife from the side of his toga. His eyes settled on Talia.

The empress glared at her attacker. He lunged, knife darting out in front of him. Talia's feet edged closer to the lip of the terrace cliff. The blade swung for her stomach.

An angry screech cracked the air. Ecbas was yanked away by a curved beak. Axias shook him violently, bones snapping and knife clattering away.

Axias slowed, then gave one more hard shake for good measure. The consul's form hung limp from her mouth. Talia found the eyes of her mount. They sparkled. Axias was enjoying herself.

The empress tilted her head to one side, indicating the terrace's edge to her mount. The gryphon tossed the broken consul off the edge and then trotted over the rest of the mangled bodies. She seemed satisfied with her work.

But there was still danger and Talia was separated from her allies. That had been part of the plan to draw the enemies forth, of course. Her initial strategy had worked, as evidenced by the shattered bodies of the rebels strewn about the terrace.

The coup would have more danger coming for her, though. Bardylis's allies would have gryphons of their own and Axias's advantage of surprise was now gone. Talia needed to get moving. Bardylis was probably free already from his cell below.

The empress stepped at last off the half wall and onto level ground. She exhaled and found the shakes returning to her body. She wondered where

else the rebels had chosen to strike first.

As if in answer, the door from the palace slammed open and more armed guardsmen appeared. They halted at the sight of Axias standing tall between them and the empress, blood dripping from her beak.

Talia was finished fighting. She needed to ensure her allies were safe. Ecbas might be dead, but the coup was very much still alive. The empress was powerless to stop it completely.

She mounted up and kicked Axias into flight without another word. They dived off the cliffside. Wind whistled and filled Talia's ears. The morning was still dark, but its haze was starting to solidify over another coup for her family's power. The empress had been expecting the attack, but she still felt the pang of failure deep within her.

They rounded the corner of the palace and dived for the training grounds. Talia looked around at the entire sky, expecting a formation of enemy gryphons to appear at any moment. For now, the air was clear.

Axias flicked an image from her superior eyes up to Talia. The empress blinked and saw their destination. Halys and Verstappas stood together in a sparring circle, bodies crumpled around them.

New wings sounded on the wind behind them and Talia returned to her own vision. Allied gryphons, with Solos on the back on their leader, swept up to Axias and joined her dive. They barreled straight into a landing, the ground rushing to meet them in a blink, and skidded across the training sand in front of the Aptorian and Tyrhian.

"Mount up," Talia said.

Her allies obeyed. Solos circled low over them with the gryphons. They would flee the capital and find safety. With one last look up at the palace, Talia and Axias lifted off and fled from Belgada.

Chapter 25

Basilas's saddle sores hardened even as the stiffness throughout his body from the struggle at Gura softened. Days blurred together like the thrum of gryphon wings. The pounding of his horse early in the morning through late in the evening receded as the vanguard drew closer to the rebels they chased.

The prima captain's mind was at ease. His worries fled after the symbolic burning of the ships at Gura.

He would support Gaius. They could defeat the rebels and be done with these silly wars. He had trouble remembering where his doubts had come from in the first place as he focused on leading the legion forward and scouting for tricks hidden by the enemy. The past was forgotten even as history loomed in the distance.

Basilas kicked his horse up the final climb to a hilltop then reined to a stop. Wind swiped across the land. But the sand had fallen away and was replaced with larger rocks and thick, red clay. The horizon was covered in purple-hued mountains.

The peaks of Cyna.

Basilas held many memories here, from back when Gaius and Paulus were simply brothers, when the imperial throne felt far above the Tulisian and the young Gaius only worried about a single legion and not the entire empire. All of that had eroded with Titus's ascension.

This was a treacherous plain. Armies clashed. Harpalus marched on this soil, as had Basilas's own ancestors from Tulis. The Fifteenth could find victory here, but a defeat might also lurk between this hilltop and those massive mountains.

Two scouts gained Basilas's hilltop and pulled up beside him. A demigryph appeared a moment later with Sergeant Nessa on its back. The gathering waited for her final approach across the ridge.

The vanguard was spread out and searched along Zagros's trail for signs of rebel plans and path of retreat. Close behind the tip of the loyalist spear came First Company and then the main march.

"Their trail goes straight for the Hill of Acab," the demigryph sergeant said. The other two scouts both nodded in agreement.

Basilas thought for a moment and cast his eyes back over the distant scenery. The lone hilltop wasn't visible yet. He would know the ruin of Fort Acab well, almost as well as the heights through Sarissa and into the Cyna Mountains.

"It's a decent spot for them to make a stand," Basilas said, half under his breath.

"It's not big enough for their whole army," one of the scouts added.

"They can fight around it. Use the hill to hold a flank," Nessa said.

The scout who'd spoken previously shrugged in response.

"Any sign of gryphons?" Basilas asked.

Nessa shook her head. "Only on the horizon."

The third scout tilted his head toward Nessa to show he'd had the same experience. "I briefly spotted a flight."

"They're hiding. Drawing us forward," Basilas said.

The prima captain thought for a few more moments as the others waited. The wind's whistle picked up an octave and flung their cloaks and capes billowing to the side. Their mounts stood stoic and waited to be kicked into motion. Nessa's demigryph, Phalos, stood slightly to the side and stretched his posture in an effort to watch the taller horses.

A stiffness crept up Basilas's leg and he shifted in the saddle to kick it away. His horse trotted sideways and then returned to his initial position.

"We push forward. Bring the van in, but I want riders on the flanks." The two scouts on horses saluted to show their understanding. Basilas then looked to the demigryph sergeant. "We press toward Acab."

The rider straightened in her saddle and gave a grim nod.

"We'll see if they're waiting for us," Basilas said to close the proceedings.

The scouts scattered. The prima captain remained on the hilltop and waited for them to disappear into the low foliage. Mountains held vigil in the distance. The Sarissa Hills drew closer along with heavy memories, both ancient and personal, within Basilas's head.

* * *

Basilas called a halt for the evening as the shadowy hilltop ruin came into full view. The prima captain no longer had the luxury of high ground and could only barely make out the rise against the dark horizon. Outside the camp's walls, the land was flat and open and bare. No enemy gryphons were sighted.

The First kept a vigilant watch. They built strong fortifications and Basilas barely slept from worry that the rebels would back and attack through the darkness. But the night held quiet.

In the morning, he kept his men in position and waited for the main column of the Fifteenth to catch up. It took until midday for Second Company to appear, but the main army column marched in quickly after.

Air Captain Martius flew in from the east on Avorian and sent his gryphon cavalry forward to scout. His first report came back via Clavius and Ptolemas. The message arrived just as General Gaius and Volgus touched down at Basilas's position. Clavius held his report until Gaius dismounted.

"They're waiting," Clavius said once the general was ready. This confirmed Basilas's suspicions, but then the next information surprised him. "They're camped in the hill's rear. It seems open to me."

"They'll be waiting in ambush on top," Gaius said. The general's words came out rough, like he hadn't spoken all day while on the march and needed to clear his throat.

"We have to take the hill," Basilas said.

"We do," Gaius agreed.

The prima captain gazed north. Acab was hidden by the front walls of the fort, but he could picture the rocky rise in his mind clearly enough. Moss-covered ruins, thrusting from hard ground and steep walls. There were easy enough paths up the rise, but the Fifteenth's attack would be funneled into narrow passageways and terraces at the top.

"Their gryphons stay hidden, or at least grounded within the main camp. They gave us free rein to scout." Clavius crossed his arms. His mount

Ptolemas prowled behind him, pacing impatiently and wanting to return to the sky.

“If we push forward, they’ll engage.” Basilas looked to Gaius.

“It’d be nice to know their full strength. They could have more war beasts than they showed at Gura.” Gaius took off his helmet and scratched his head. He tucked the helm under one arm. “The priority is taking that hill.”

Basilas nodded in agreement and then chose to complete Gaius’s orders for him. He looked to Clavius. “Take Ptolemas and send Air Captain Martius to us immediately. We’ve got a raid to plan.”

Ptolemas darted to his rider’s side before Clavius even acknowledged the order.

“Yes, sir,” the rider said.

The prima captain and general stepped away as the gryphon took off. They bent their heads low against the rush of wind.

Basilas’s mind already raced ahead. He knew what was needed to assault the hilltop. The position would anchor the loyalist flank in the next attack on Zagros’s main army. But the prima captain was uneasy and he couldn’t place why. Brute force would help find the answer.

* * *

Basilas crept out of the fort with his men and moved away from the light of the camp and stopped and counted to one hundred slowly. His eyes adjusted to the deep darkness. There was a distant glow in the west of the full rebel

position and a slight break in the horizon to mark their target. Beyond that, the world was black.

He unsheathed his sword. The men behind had shields strapped to their backs for a climb. He looked them over, shadows blending into the landscape. They were ready.

With no second thoughts and very little worries, Basilas faced the dark splotch of the hill and advanced without a word or orders backward.

The night was cool and quiet and his assault group marched in three columns and didn't disturb the peacefulness. There would be rebels waiting for them on top of the hill. Basilas wasn't naïve enough to believe the enemy would let the loyalists take high ground easily. But perhaps they could surprise Zagros and gain the ruin's peak without much trouble.

Were he still a part of the Tulisian army back in his homeland, there would've been sacrifices and offerings made to Fate and various Old Gods before the talons broke from the camp. The omens would've been consulted and then consulted again. The paths of Fate were interpreted continuously until everything aligned for the perfect attack.

Belgadans shunned such frivolity.

They attacked and made their own luck.

Taking this hillside would go a long way in making amends. Basilas was ashamed that he'd ever doubted Gaius or that they even came close to a conflict of any sort. The general was good and loyal.

He paused, finding himself halfway up the climb of the ruin already after being lost in thought. The slope was steep, but he'd yet to hear a sound or sense any movement above him. There were no signs of the enemy. He pressed on and focused down on this task at hand.

The land was no longer rocky and loose. Broken walls and fallen ruins jutted from the clay. The attack force climbed deeper up Acab.

Harpalus had once rested with his army here in winter to maintain control of the highlands. The fort had been a retreat at the height of the Indomitable's empire. But those days were only memories now.

Basilas felt a sharp lip with his leading hand. He hauled himself up, redrawing Pothos and blinking against the darkness before him. They were atop a tower or on an upper floor of the old fortress. His eyes needed a moment to adjust to the new openness.

If only the enemy gave it to him.

Flames erupted on all sides. The brightness blinded him, throwing his vision from extreme darkness to glaring light. Rebels screamed forward to attack as Basilas's soldiers clambered up to his level.

The prima captain raised his sword and parried, stepping into the teeth of the ambush. His loyalists streamed past him. Clashes clanged and the fight for the hill began.

* * *

The rustle of boot falls and clatter of armor whispered through the silence of the night. The unit stopped and spread out under the hill. Martius tried to catch his air with long, controlled breaths. His heart pounded in his ears.

Above him, Avorian flew calmly, engulfed by the blackness of night. The sky was overcast, the stars covered, and the land was quiet and ready

and open. The gryphon floated on the air and listened to the wind whistling by him.

After what felt like mere moments, the low clanging resumed again from the front and Martius was pulled forward in the mass of men. Prima Captain Basilas led from the front. Martius had been positioned in the middle. Clavius was on the right flank with the First's Wing Talon.

The idea was that their bonds with their gryphons were valuable for relaying updates back to the air cavalry and General Gaius in the sky with Volgus. They would stay with the attack and fight where needed, but they also would maintain contact with the rear camp.

The ground lifted under his boots and he soon found himself crawling on all fours up a steep slope. The night was silent and the shifting and soft murmurs of the men climbing could easily be mistaken as tricks of the wind. To Martius's ears, it sounded immensely loud.

Martius placed a hand down and felt the roughness of a large stone. He hauled himself up its side. At its top was a flat portion of land jutting into the hillside that provided a brief rest from the climb.

A scream broke through the blackness above.

Whether rebel or loyalist, Martius would never know. But the assault force came alive and surged upward. The rider flung himself with them, crawling among the other soldiers as they seethed to the top of the height.

The next crest was flat and Martius hauled himself up over the mossy stone of an ancient wall. He jumped to his feet and drew his sword. The world was illuminated by firelight. Chaos reverberated before him.

There were tunnels breaking away in both directions. Further hillside climbed above the fighting. But the rebels had chosen to make their stand on this narrow terrace.

Warriors ran in all directions and swords and spears flashed and clanged against each other. Torches were flung here and there. The bright light of a larger fire shone out of the tunnels.

Horns broke through the air, answered by a gryphon screech. Martius sensed Avorian crashing into defenders on the right flank, tossing them off the hillside in a tumbling wave. The rider lowered his head and charged in that direction.

The flow of men funneled down a broken, covered pathway. Rebels fled and the loyalists cut through them as they rolled onward. Martius was trapped in the crush of legionnaires within the hallway and never got close to an enemy as they gained ground.

More horns echoed and the light from the bonfire grew brighter. At last the hallway opened and Martius stumbled into clean air. Two rebels jumped him with spears.

He batted the thrusts away and struck out with his shorter blade. The rebels darted away and Martius followed.

More loyalists poured out of the hallway and pressed after the faltering defenders. Martius targeted one opponent. He lashed out with his sword, knocked the spear tip down, and then grabbed it with his free hand. In the same moment, he stabbed upward with his blade and struck true through a gap in the enemy's armor while he pulled the spear free from the dying soldier's grasp.

He dropped the weapon on the crumbled body. Spears would be poor weapons in the tight confines of this battle.

But when Martius looked up and advanced around a curve in the slope, he found the hilltop open. First Company had pushed through the passageways of the ruin and now fought on a vast table of rubble. The rebel

bonfire glowed on the far precipice, casting long shadows across the battle and making all the fighting seem like it came from giants.

A blur ripped through the rear of the enemy in front of the fire. Avorian was on the attack. The war beast gripped rebels in his claws as he lifted back skyward. Martius smiled as screams careened away in the distance.

Three rebel spearmen leaped down from a boulder on Martius's left flank. He spun between them, dodging their initial thrusts. In a blur, he hacked across the arms of one enemy and, not waiting to observe the result of his initial strike, then spun into the guard of the second. Martius's sword thrust up and under the breastplate. A gurgled grunt came in response.

The rider pivoted, sensing danger to his rear. The third spearmen missed him with an errant thrust before retreating to block the loyalist counter.

Martius hacked downward three times, seeking to break the spear but with no success. He feigned a fourth strike, fooling the rebel and twirled to slash and thrust against the man's face and neck. The rebel stumbled away and knocked into the first enemy flailing in pain. Both were cut down by other loyalists quickly.

Martius stole a glance to the east as he caught his breath. Something drew his attention. He found rebel gryphons flying to the defenders' aid. This had been expected, but what startled Martius was the clear visage of Hoplas with Goras holding a spear aloft in the saddle barreling at him.

First Company had done well to clear a path through the rebels. They were on the brink of taking the ruin. But Martius stood in the attack's rear, exposed on an open portion of ground. He was an easy target for the rebel gryphons.

All the other fighting tumbled away around him. There was only the approaching gryphon and Martius's sweaty grip beneath the pommel of his

sword. The weapon felt small, light and worthless, in his hand. Hoplas snarled closer.

The gryphon's beak was open and his eyes were wide in triumph and sparkling in the firelight. His talons were longer than the loyalist's weapon and looked as numerous as a horde of Sprawlings.

Martius bent his knees, loading weight to his legs and preparing to execute a maneuver Basilas had taught him. He could dive out of the way and hope that Hoplas swept past him. The war beast flew too fast. He would...

A blur slashed from the left and slammed into the enemy gryphon. Hoplas's head whipped sideways and the spear flung from Goras's hand and the pair were swept away as Martius rolled. The rider felt a rush and a crunching pain that didn't come from his physical body. The world lost focus, but a triumph reverberated from Avorian through the strike.

Martius righted himself. His sword was still tight in his hand. Goras lay in a heap before him.

The unseated rebel crawled to his feet and looked around, first the wrong way, then at Martius. He grimaced.

Perhaps the expression was supposed to be a sneer, something to strike fear into Martius's heart. But the suddenness of Avorian's saving attack had boosted Martius's confidence. Goras was bruised and disoriented. The rider spun his sword and advanced on his enemy.

Goras wrestled his own blade from his scabbard, only barely pulling it free in time. The two weapons clanged and Martius shoved his enemy away. He slashed down, then spun his sword to bring it low under Goras's guard. The enemy parried but took another step back during the blocking.

Martius pressed. His foot stumbled over a body on the ground. He tumbled forward and had to catch himself with his free hand on the ground. He spun up quickly and slapped away Goras's counter, but the damage was done. The battle reset with the rebel now the aggressor.

Grunting in frustration, Martius parried three thrusts and then countered. Goras shoved away the attack and the two separated again. It was only then that Martius noticed the snarling and clacking of talons behind him.

He circled Goras and stole a glance to where Avorian wrestled with Hoplas. The gryphons rolled, growling and biting at each other, talons scraping across the rough stones. Their heads swung back and forth with their necks crashing together. Martius was enthralled by the action even though his eyes could barely follow the duel. Goras took advantage of the distraction.

He hacked out with his sword. Martius sidestepped and swung a punch and caught Goras in the jaw, but only with a glancing blow. The enemy swung the back end of a fist and caught Martius more cleanly on the side of the head.

Darkness evaporated in white light, sparkles filling Martius's mind. He careened to the side and only barely kept from falling to his knees. He blinked and when he refocused, Goras was already in his face.

Martius managed a desperate parry and fought to regain full control of his vision. He blinked and found a little more focus, but then Goras's shoulder barged into him. His back hit the ground with a crunch. Goras's weight crushed Martius's chest. The pair rolled, Martius gasping for air, and his sword careened out of his hand.

The duel devolved into a wrestling match. Martius grunted and tried to flip to the higher position with his shoulder strength. Goras's tunic pressed

into his face. Sweat blurred the loyalist's vision. Everywhere he shifted, Goras's weight pressed on him harder.

This was nothing like any of his sparring sessions or his training back in Luno. This was barbaric struggle. There was only survival.

Martius finally freed an arm and lashed out with a fist and felt the pleasure of connecting with the rebel's teeth. Goras snarled and rolled and finally released Martius from the ground. They separated and Martius struggled to his feet, head on a swivel, searching for his enemy's next attack.

He found Goras standing with his sword back in his hand.

Martius's own blade glimmered across his eye, but on the ground on the far side of his enemy.

Goras spat and then smiled, blood outlining his teeth. He raised the sword. Martius had nowhere to run. He had no defense left.

A gryphon wing slammed into the rebel and knocked him away. The wind from the blow made Martius falter back a step. Goras yelped and then was gone.

Avorian had lunged away from his own fight to help this rider. But now Hoplas swept into Avorian's exposed flank, striking with a lowered head and sending the beasts tumbling away. Martius ran for his sword, thinking to attack Hoplas in the rear while Goras was down.

There was a grunt and then a yell of pain and rage somewhere. Martius ducked and grasped the hilt from the ground. He spun to face the gryphons. Hoplas kicked off Avorian and forced the loyalist mount up against the hillside.

The rebel then swept the other direction, claws striking the ground twice to bound the length of the terrace. He stopped by Goras, who had just

struggled to his feet, one arm held tightly to his ribs.

Avorian's strike had hurt the rebel. Goras hauled himself into the saddle. Hoplas's body heaved with large breaths underneath. The rebel rider sneered at Martius as his mount kicked into the sky.

Avorian came to his own rider's side. Hoplas's scarred face etched into Martius's mind, as did Goras's evil glare. They should give chase. They should press the advantage with Goras injured. But there was the full assault to worry about now.

The ruin's terrace came back to Martius's focus. Screams rang everywhere. The rebel bonfire had collapsed and was spreading up the hillside. Rebel torches fled off the ridge down the dark slope to the east. Loyalists maintained their hold on the high ground and didn't give chase.

Clangs and yells of fierce fighting echoed from the far side of the ruin. Some rebels were still holding out. Martius took in a steadying breath. Then he sent a message silently to Volgus via Avorian.

The great gryphon was aware of the rebel gryphons. Martius sought out Volgus's current position. Gaius and the great gryphon were engaged in their own duel on the right flank over a pocket of ground fighting. There were still plenty of rebel mounts in the sky besides Hoplas.

Avorian met Martius's eyes and gave a quick nod with his beak closed. He was uninjured but was breathing heavily. Fatigue wouldn't slow him down.

He kicked into the sky and was gone before the rider realized he hadn't thanked his mount for saving him. Now back alone and on open ground, Martius looked for where he was needed among the infantry.

Loyalists streamed to the southern side of the hill. Fire raged among the old-growth foliage within the ruin and the legionnaires had started beating it

back with cloaks. The din of the rebel defenders fell away. Their ambush was all but finished.

Martius yelled out for water to be brought up the hill. He sent more instructions to Avorian above. His air corps could be used to help douse the flames and secure the high ground.

Chapter 26

Smoke trailed off the hilltop in the morning light. Smog drifted and circled the rise before being pushed off over the rebel position in the west. Martius stumbled through the battlefield and the cleanup work from the Fifteenth.

The main contingent of the legion's companies still held below and east of the hill. They pushed up on the hill's flank and used the ruin as an anchor. Outrider demigryphs and horses skirmished with the enemy, but most of the movement had fallen into a lull.

The two sides waited and rested. But the next fight loomed close.

Martius and Avorian, like most of the legion, hadn't slept. They flew water up to the hill and helped quell the rebel fire. Then there were defenses to build up and scouting flights to consolidate. Even if the rider had the luxury of more time, he wasn't sure he could've slept. His eyes were clouded with memories of wrestling with Goras on the moss-covered stones. Martius fought and struggled his hardest. He wasn't strong enough. Goras had bested him.

A clear image hung over Martius's mind: Goras standing with a blade between the loyalist rider and his sword. Avorian had saved him, but the end had been close. The gryphon could've been hurt by sacrificing his own duel to protect Martius. They were always in danger within a battle, but the ambush assault in the night had felt the closest Martius had ever been to death.

There were also the duels back at Gura and images of Goras with a spear thrusting for Avorian's neck. All the worries combined and compounded, sending Martius's thoughts into a tailspin.

He kicked at a blackened piece of wood. He marched down a tunnel formed by collapsed columns and made his way to the western and open part of the ruin. In different times, Martius would be marveling at the history of this place. Had Harpalus the Indomitable not walked down this hallway? Had Demeter not designed this fort to command the path into the Sarissa Hills?

What wonder a younger Martius would've experienced at these old stories. But Goras's eyes over a triumphant smirk shrouded everything.

The rider pushed out of the hallway and into an open terrace. Most all the bodies had been removed, but there were charred piles of wood and discarded arms still strewn about. A helm lay upside down against a rock, dried blood splattered on its flank. Off the side of the hill and to the west, the rebels held position. Goras was down there.

Martius let out a sigh and shifted closer to the terrace's edge. He propped one foot up on a weathered boulder and leaned on the raised leg and stared at the enemy.

Goras and Hoplas would seek out Martius and Avorian in the next battle, the same as all the previous fighting. That man was his direct enemy, supported by more than a legion's worth of rebel soldiers. The Fifteenth's task was to destroy them.

In Luno and during Martius's earliest time in the legion fighting the Sprawlings, he'd been eager for battle. He sought glory and wanted it as quickly as possible.

He'd found victory and accolades and heroism. Avorian deserved most of the credit, of course, but Martius felt that he'd been brave and fought on the correct side of the empire's conflicts. He fought for a just empress.

But all glory was fleeting and tainted.

War was horrible. It wasn't the valorous and heroic deeds written of in the history book, but bloody and blunted and charred. Men died pointlessly for glory. What good were legends to the dead?

Martius, now that he'd seen his own death so close, wanted more of his life than an early fall, however glorious. He wanted more time with Talia and for Axias to fly with Avorian around the capital and the world at large to be at peace. He wanted prosperity, not battle.

The rider straightened and adjusted his scabbard belt. The weight of his gladius rested heavy on his left side. His legs ached with fatigue and his eyelids hung heavy.

He was finished with battle. But the fighting wasn't done with him.

"Martius," a voice said from behind him.

The boy turned to find Air Captain Clavius beckoning him. Martius exhaled and pushed off his rock.

"Gaius wants us," Clavius said when the rider reached him. "We plan for the attack."

The general squatted, his feet on the remains of an ancient half wall. The hill was a high enough vantage to survey the rebels perfectly. He scanned over the tents and wooden walls and towers of Zagros's camp.

The general puzzled over why the rebels hadn't fought with more vigor or set up a stronger ambush to defend Acab. Zagros had something else planned. Gaius just couldn't discern what.

Movement caught Gaius's periphery and he twitched his head to look over his right shoulder. Basilas stood behind him with an array of officers a few steps farther back. They awaited Gaius's orders.

The prima captain had been right about assaulting Acab immediately. Decisive action had won the night and limited casualties for the Fifteenth. They now had an anchor on the flank of their advance and could dictate the next battle.

Gaius looked back to the enemy and imagined the troops marching across in formation at each other. Zagros's left flank, to Gaius's right and below the hill, angled to meet the advancing loyalists. Cavalry dominated the far rebel right. And Gaius thrust decisively and broke the rebel center.

He nodded once. Basilas misinterpreted the gesture and stepped forward.

"We can take them," the first spear said.

Gaius tried to match the first spear's confidence. Before, immediately after the battles at Gura, Basilas had been dour, eyes downcast, his mind cloudy. He now stood tall and glared at the enemy and sought to end the war in one fell blow.

Gaius now held the doubts.

There was a balance to be struck here. The intersection of the Dueling Infinities was equally weighted on all sides, curving out to both good and evil. The loyalists were at such a convergence and needed the right balance of decisive aggression and cautious restraint.

Gaius stood. He could give the empire that balance.

The general stepped off his perch. He put his back on the enemy.

"We march forward in the morning, once First Company is rested."

“We’re ready to go now.” Basilas stood to Gaius’s left with his chest puffed out.

“I need your men fully rested,” the general said.

He looked over the other officers present, the Fifteenth’s air captains and company captains and a few lieutenants and sergeants. All brave. All as ready as Basilas.

The general laid out his positions to align with the vision in his head.

“Second Company has the center,” Gaius said. He held up a hand to quell Basilas’s objections before they started. “The First will be on our right flank with the protection of this hill. That’s where Zagros will position his best men. My best should be there too. That position holds and supports the main advance.”

Basilas cocked his head to one side in thought. Then he nodded, understanding the flow of Gaius’s chosen battle quickly enough. The general continued with barely a pause.

“Cavalry will hold the left. Our gryphons are based on Acab. Martius, you’re to respond to Goras’s flights, is that clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

There was something missing in the air captain’s normal vigor. His response had been quick, but there was a crack within the words. The boy’s gaze wasn’t quite focused. Gaius didn’t have time to dwell on the matter, but he pushed it into the back of his mind for later. There were more instructions to give.

“The rest of the companies will support the Second. Standard three-line. Get your men rested and make sure they have a good meal. Be ready to form up at first light.”

The officers saluted and yelled out confident affirmations.

“Dismissed,” Gaius said to end proceedings. Everyone save Basilas dispersed.

Volgus drifted slowly in a circle above the hill. Gaius shielded his eyes from the sun and tracked the flight. His gryphon was anxious to get the fighting started the same as the infantrymen. He dealt with the waiting by flying and watching the enemy and scanning the countryside for movement.

“We could attack now. My men are fresh enough,” Basilas said after a few moments.

No, they’re not. Not for the type of fighting we’ve got ahead of us.

Gaius kept the words to himself.

“You’ll be the key flank,” he said out loud instead. “I need your men in top shape. You had a tough assault last night. Plus the gryphons need rest.” Gaius waved a hand up at Volgus.

Basilas didn’t argue further. He set his mouth in a grim line. “Fair enough. I’ll be ready in the morning.”

“We must be vigilant in the watch,” Gaius added, almost as an afterthought. “Zagros could attack us. If he pushes us back off this hill, it’ll change everything.”

“We won’t let that happen.” Basilas’s confidence would permeate through the soldiers, not just in First Company but the entire legion. It was good to have the prima captain back with him. The empire was unsettled and friend had become foe. Strong allies were vital to the loyalist cause.

“Did Martius seem off to you? Were he or Avorian hurt last night?” Gaius asked.

“Not that I heard.” Basilas shook his head. “He seemed fine to me.”

The general chose to leave the subject at that for now. They had much work to do on the day, as always.

He took a glance behind him at Zagros's waiting legion. The rebels were silent and still in their camp. Gaius, with Basilas, then marched back through their men and down off the hilltop to prepare for the assault on the morrow.

Chapter 27

The battle commenced and opposite formations fanned out like the military diagrams etched in Martius's history books. Avorian drifted on a current of wind and kept his height with funnels of heat coming off the land. Rebel gryphons opposite them monitored from the same height and spread across the new battlefield.

The enemy infantry arrayed in a flat line except for in the north, where they angled to pressure the hill the loyalists had already taken. In response, Gaius placed First Company holding his right, matching the rebel line, and attached with the rest of his legion against the center.

Three deep lines advanced across the field. The open plain in the south was already covered in dust from cavalry skirmishing to solidify the last flank. The two Belgadan shield walls approached contact.

Martius couldn't help but notice one of the distant specks mirrored Avorian's flight path precisely. It would be Goras and Hoplas, waiting to strike out and finish what they'd almost accomplished two nights previous.

A shudder shook his body but was quelled by the calming influence of Avorian's bond. The gryphon's emotions seemed to hold even more sway as battle approached. His control was heavier and more precise, aided by adrenaline and the proximity of glory.

Martius gripped the reins tight and reset himself. Harpalus wouldn't have held fear this close to a fight. The soldiers of the Memnas Campaign weren't ever afraid.

Martius swallowed. A strong taste of metal came to his mouth. But that was the only remnant of his fear he allowed to plague him. Avorian tilted and circled left just as the faint sound of war horns echoed below them. The loyalists approached javelin range.

Every standard across the Fifteenth was tattered and worn. The least used of them were over at the front line, marking Second Company in the center with the Third on either side of them. Next came the Fourth and so on in numerical order back through the deep lines.

The symbols of the legion, including the twisting Infinities on a banner in the rear, had weathered much since their victorious return from fighting the Sprawlings in the north. Even after defeating Paulus at Arta, there had been no time to rest and regroup and deal with matters so trivial as sewing new banners. Martius's mind and body felt as worn as the standards below, but they would push on.

Curia's victory at Memnas had come after a decade of fighting. His soldiers had pushed through. So would the Fifteenth.

Avorian dropped from his height and linked with the air cavalry flight over the advance. The rebel infantry pushed out as well and closed the gap to their attackers quicker than expected. Above them, the enemy war mounts ripped toward the hovering loyalists.

Javelins ripped from either side. Talons flexed and beaks screeched. The two sides struck with a rumbling roar. The gryphons were a beat behind the ground troops. Martius assessed his opponent's approach with a flick of his eyes. The rebel great gryphon Hoplas led his corps from the middle, directly opposite Avorian. The enemy side had more gryphons and spread out wide to utilize this advantage. Martius chose to cut through their middle as quickly as he could.

He dropped his reins and held fists out to either side, signaling his men. Clavius hovered on his right and Anshas waited on his left. Martius then pointed forward with both hands open, fingers directing his riders into their initial plan of attack.

Clavius and Anshas zipped by Martius before the lead air captain could get his hands back on the reins. Not one to be outdone, Avorian dropped off his hover and accelerated in an arc downward before swinging back up in attack. The full air corps powered in behind the three leads.

Martius lowered himself in the saddle to lend as much speed as possible. He tried to pick out Hoplas again in the approaching flurry. Avorian caught up to Ptolemas just as he reached the rebels. The lesser gryphon rolled to the right and was immediately engaged by an enemy mount.

Hoplas tore in from the same direction and Avorian broke left, falling away to draw the enemy along his tail. Martius craned his head back and saw Goras straining forward over his war beast. The rebel wanted to finish what he'd started on the Acab Hill. Avorian let them close.

They fell from the main fighting altitude and swung low over the crashing infantry formations. The wind dominated Martius's ears, but he could imagine the howls and screams and clanging of the battle's pandemonium. The fighting ripped underneath them and they emerged out the other side with Hoplas still close on their tail. They swung through the dust kicked up by the cavalry skirmishing and barreled over open land.

Avorian pulled around to the west and took Hoplas over the rear of the loyalists' side. It was always better to duel over his own army with the possibility of support from the ground. But Hoplas still had the superior position and it was on attack. Avorian needed to break him off.

The loyalist gryphon banked to the left and then rolled his body to execute a dive. He flew low over the plumed helmets in the Fifteenth's rear. The aggressiveness of the maneuver loosened Hoplas's hold on Avorian's tail a bit.

Marching boot falls and a few cheers rose from the legionnaires. Some soldiers ducked underneath their shields and a few javelins were flung fruitlessly across Hoplas's wake. The two gryphons powered onward.

Avorian climbed and took them in an arcing path over the right flank. Martius alternated between focusing on their tail and taking glancing observations of the fighting both on the ground and in the air. He was surprised to see First Company and the right flank disengaged from the enemy.

Both the rebels and loyalists here had advanced to protect the flanks of the central fighting, but they'd gone no closer than javelin range. Rebel talons held the closest part of the flank to the center, but there were other enemies dressed differently and without the bright shields of a normal legionary force. This had to be the Sarissa infantry contingent of Zagros's force. He'd given the tribesmen the key role of holding the extreme northern flank.

For now, it looked like Basilas was content in his strong position. Acab hemmed in his right and the fighting roiled on his left. If the Sarissa weren't going to advance or attempt to flank the main battle, First Company could merely hold.

Martius took all this in and analyzed the status in a flash. Avorian banked once more and headed south. The rider took a glance back at their chaser and was surprised to see Hoplas breaking off pursuit. Perhaps the

rebel didn't want to overextend too far behind loyalist lines. This gave Avorian the opening he needed.

He turned hard and bore west toward his initial position over the center of the fighting. Martius scanned over the gryphon duels and took note of everyone's status. Volgus chased a great gryphon, probably Naxos, and was gaining fast, but another rebel mount clung tight to his own tail. Anshas barrel-rolled out of the way of a rebel on the flank and Clavius chased a blur of a mount southwest.

The other loyalists worked in pairs. Tarchus and Marzio crisscrossed and flung rebels off kilter with their merging flight paths. But Ponderas was furiously flapping back west with two rebels on her tail. Enemies flew everywhere in a flurry.

Avorian kept his eyes focused on Hoplas while Martius scanned. The rebel great gryphon circled wide over his own side of the battle. Just as the rider settled on helping Ponderas, Goras angled his mount for Avorian. The rebel was on them in three rapid heartbeats.

Avorian flapped to pull back at the last moment before impact. Hoplas's eyes widened over his lunge the same as Martius's. Both were surprised at Avorian's sudden maneuver.

The loyalist flipped backwards, nearly jolting Martius off the saddle and letting Hoplas fling over them. He then rolled from his upside-down position and cupped his wings to dive after the flailing rebel. They picked up speed and barreled in on Hoplas's tail just as the enemy regained control.

Hoplas fled. He angled west over where the front lines crunched together in a massive melee. A ballista bolt flung up at Avorian and passed, just below his hind legs. Unfazed, he held to the rebel's tail. Martius found

himself gripping his gryphon's neck feathers tightly, knuckles white and teeth clenched together.

They wove over the expanse of fighting. Hoplas executed multiple tight turns to throw Avorian off, but when he tried to bank around west and take them back over the rebel middle, another artillery bolt snapped into his path. Startled, the gryphon's wings fluttered.

That was all the opening Avorian needed.

The war beast lunged. His front talons extended and beak opened at the end of a taut neck and head. Hoplas sputtered in midair, wings askew, body twisting in a last-ditch effort of defense. The two gryphons came together and Avorian lashed at Hoplas's chest and side. The rebel brought his back legs up and pushed, sending his attacker off course with a heave. Martius was struck in the face by Avorian's neck and his world briefly sparkled with stars.

There was still a painful screech. The world spun and Avorian only barely regained control low over the battle.

He leveled off and pulled up to a hover. Martius shook his head to clear it. Avorian pivoted and found his opponent. Hoplas drifted adjacent to them and had blood dripping from one of his front legs and shoulder.

Martius's breath heaved in time with Avorian's. The rider adjusted himself in the saddle and drew out his sword. He raised it in the air. Avorian sent a screech across at his enemy. Martius then lowered the weapon and pointed it at Goras. His fears, every worry, had evaporated, overwhelmed by bloodlust and the battle rush.

Goras didn't draw his own weapon. Martius's blade was merely a symbolic challenge. Their gryphons would do the fighting, and the loyalist knew within his soul and their strong bond that Avorian would be the victor.

The pair wanted it quick, to rid themselves of Goras's plague within his mind. Then they could get back to helping his air cavalry and the Fifteenth at large and win this battle and end Zagros's civil war.

With another screech, Avorian lunged to start the next duel.

* * *

Gaius observed the unfolding battle from two vantage points. He stood in his usual position, center-rear, and directed reinforcements from the second line into gaps where he felt the impact of the front line to be faltering. Additionally, between the flickering of his eyelids, he received images from Volgus above. The great gryphon chased off rebel war beasts and sought out Naxos. The latter evaded adeptly and largely kept to his side of the fighting. This allowed Volgus to throw his strength around and swing any duels nearby in the loyalist favor.

Throughout his work, Volgus scanned over the enemy positioning and relayed information to his general. This gryphon-eyed view was the great advantage of the Belgadan legion. Except in this battle the loyalists fought against themselves. Naxos would be sending the same updates and views to Zagros. Gaius needed to find another way to outsmart them.

On the right flank, the two sides only stared at each other, not wanting to engage within the narrow confines between the main fighting and the hilltop of Acab in the northern rear.

The center was a crush of men and shields. It wasn't a contest of swordsmanship or pristine accuracy from spear thrusts. There was only

formation against formation, shield wall again shield wall, and the discipline of the legionnaires working together to shove the other off their mark.

The fight was a stalemate.

“Fang of the Third holding, sir!”

“Wing of the Third stable, sir!”

“Ax of the Second faltering, sir! They need to be reinforced.”

Statuses of the talons on either flank flew into Gaius. He focused on the center, where the Second was smashed together and shoving against the rebels.

“Overall Second status: holding but not making progress,” the latest messenger said. There was screaming and clanging and screeching from above and Gaius had to strain to keep the company and talon positions straight. “Megaras requests additional weight, sir.”

Gaius flicked out a hand to his signal corps and the banners changed to send forth Fourth Company in full from the second line. The messenger who’d relayed the note from Megaras scampered off to return to the captain.

Wind buffeted Gaius and nearly knocked him over. Two soldiers from the signal corps fell to the dirt and then scrambled up and raised their banners once more.

Two gryphons, locked clots of claw, barreled over the gathering. The war beasts seemed to be passing lower and Gaius was surprised at least one hadn’t crashed through his reserves already.

He closed his eyes with a long blink, connecting with Volgus. The mount was to the north and streaked between three sets of duels, breaking each apart. Naxos dived after the loyalist great gryphon, but Volgus darted

away quickly. He circled through another duel where a rebel closed on Ptolemas's tail. The Fifteenth's air corps was doing an admirable job keeping the rebel gryphons from striking down on the infantry.

Gaius opened his eyes and stretched his neck to see over his reserves and monitor the Fourth reinforcements as they advanced. The company unlimbered itself, twisting shields to the side, and marching forward at double-time. Second Company's line was fully engaged with pockets broken and losing ground.

The Fourth would only increase the crush. Volgus sent images of Zagros committing more men to his center as well. The rebel also reinforced on the southern flank. Gaius brought a hand up and scratched his chin. He narrowed his eyes, dwelling on the situation.

Momentum was slow. The legion advanced. The Fourth would accelerate the fight and Gaius still had a whole third line he could commit.

"Signal."

The men around him scrambled into motion. A short soldier from the signal corps stepped up and saluted with his chest high and out. Gaius looked down and met the man's eye.

"Right flank to advance. Basilas needs to push off Zagros's support."

The saluting soldier darted away and the signal banners shifted once more. Volgus cawed within Gaius's bond to show he approved of the ordered maneuver. The general took a moment to breathe and clear his mind against all the noise and movement around him. There was no time for the reset, no space to think. But that was all the more reason to take it.

Looking from Volgus's view, Gaius could see up the entirety of his line. The two sides were identical, except for the Sarissa contingent in the north.

The masses of men molded together and churned up the ground and slowly cut into each other.

If Basilas could break through on the right flank, the Fifteenth could encircle one side of Zagros's force. Perhaps a few rebel companies would break and the entire army would flee and the battle could be won quickly and with less bloodshed.

That was the ideal scenario. What a general envisioned rarely played out, though Gaius knew Basilas could work miracles. He trusted his friend.

Chapter 28

“**S**teady! Keep the line!”

Basilas continually called out orders to keep his men organized. Only the legionnaires closest to him would hear the words over the din of the larger battle, but he shouted anyway. The action kept him focused while his eyes scanned worryingly over their target.

The Sarissa infantry on the right were mountains. They wore the gray-green cloaks of their tribes and held long swords down in front of them with tips at rest in the dirt. Long hair hung loose over broad shoulders.

None wore armor.

Basilas chose to focus on this weakness. His heavy infantry should smash through these tribesmen and encircle the standard rebel force here. But there was a reason Zagros stationed the strange allies on this critical flank. The prima captain tried to reach back to decades ago and his engagements against the hills men in their high lands to the east and south.

That had been mountain warfare and featured very few pitched battles. It was unit against the unit, with even talon-sized engagements rare. Basilas couldn't think of a time where the Sarissa side had fought on flat terrain before the last battle at Gura.

Gaius's latest orders would put their prowess to the test.

“Shields! Armad!”

The order was echoed up the ranks so all could move as one. Sarissa archers were spread behind the entire flank, not just their own troops. The

loyalist company approached arrow range.

A clattering responded in waves as the front ranks locked their shields together. The second line pressed in behind the first. Every row after shuffled forward as well. Basilas, wedged in the third rank, was crushed as the formation compressed. The talon lieutenants called out additional orders in the practiced sequence.

“Second line overlap!”

The next row of shields rose and were laid over the helmets of the first line and against the lip of the front wall.

“Third line! Overlap!”

The third made the same maneuver. Basilas joined, swinging up his shield and tucking it under the rear edge of the second shields that now formed the roof over the formation. The fourth clattering up behind them and was quickly followed by the fifth and so on throughout the entire group.

Just as the last line completed the rooftop armor of the Armad, arrows began clacking into their new barrier. There were only a few at first. But like the beginning of a rainstorm, they built and soon became a deluge.

“Arrows!” someone yelled from Basilas’s right.

The prima captain frowned at the unnecessary call. But then a shadow passed over the sun and the sudden impact of hundreds of arrows from a single volley shook his formation down to the boots of every legionnaire. This was no pattering, but a roaring boom.

Screams echoed among the ranks in response here and there. The shields protected most of the soldiers. The formation slowed its advance. There would be further volleys. Basilas gritted his teeth and strained against the weight of the shield above him and marched onward with his men.

He only had visibility through a small pocket of light through the other soldiers. The battlefield was hazy and bright. Under the shields was a hot darkness. The prima captain could barely make out the enemy front line, but the distance was hard to judge.

He used the angles of the arrows arcing in to inform him of their pace. The projectiles came quicker and the metal arrowheads made a lower - octave ping as they scraped across the tops of their shields.

Basilas wished he could break out and assess the movement of the enemy with his own eyes. He felt blind.

“Make ready!”

All orders were yelled in the midst of battle, but whichever lieutenant shouted this one sounded strained. The call felt strange, unneeded. The prima captain opened his mouth to scream out a counter command. Then a great wave crashed against his men.

The Sarissa attacked, snarling and slamming into the shield wall.

Both men in front of Basilas were shoved backward and the prima captain dropped one arm to push back against the sudden rush. He felt himself compressed along with his men as he heard growling from the tribesmen on the far side and their swords clacking against the barrier. The legion slowly lost ground.

“Respond!” Basilas yelled.

His lieutenants reacted.

“Heave!”

The shield wall shoved out, sending the Sarissa stumbling over each other.

“Advance!”

The formation marched forward and took the small space gained by their shove. Another call to heave was thrown out, but the Sarissa were already snarling back against the shield wall. The second attempt proved less effective.

“Drop shields!” Basilas ordered over his men. He hadn’t heard arrows striking his force recently.

The shields fell in a wave outward from his position. He brought his own down and daylight returned to the world. He blinked against the renewed brightness. The company needed more mobility.

The legionnaires went to work. Basilas’s line featured three rectangular formations with a gap hinge between them. The prima captain commanded from the center. In the spaces on his flanks, Sarissa already crashed through. The loyalist legionnaires, newly freed of the shields above their heads, slashed outward and engulfed the advance.

Basilas swung his head on a swivel and monitored to make sure none of the enemy filtered all the way through. The gaps closed. Rebel legionnaires from the left were just now joining their Sarissa allies in battle. The heavily armored Belgadans marched double-time to catch up.

These enemies were armored and carried shields, mirror images of Basilas’s own fighters. Where the Sarissa fought wildly and hacked about and swung their long blades in sweeping arcs, the rebels held formation and pushed against Basilas’s left as one.

The prima captain instinctively drifted in that direction. If the hinge between that flank and the center fighting was pushed backwards, Zagros would be through into the exposed rear of the central fighting. That would weaken Gaius’s strategy and make First Company useless and exposed.

Basilas’s left must hold.

He reached the end of his talon holding the center. Blade Talon held the middle. Wing owned the left. As Basilas stepped between them, a host of Sarissa burst forth. They spread out in the gap and rushed straight for the prima captain.

Pothos flashed and raked along the side of the first enemy before batting away another longsword. Belgadans with spears and shields ran up on Basilas's flanks. The rebels screamed into attack. The legion's first spear went to work.

He made a slash across an enemy's throat. He then parried another blow and ducked under a third. All the while, he shuffled toward the left flank and the crucial part of his line. But he had issues to deal with first.

Coming out of his latest evasion, Basilas swung Pothos upward through a Sarissa warrior. He brought the blade down to clang against another sword before spinning into this new enemy's guard and shouldering the tribesman away.

The foe stumbled backward and an ally thrust a spear down into him. Before the Belgadan could pull his weapon free, another Sarissa barreled into him. Basilas made to assist the spearman, but more enemies appeared by the moment.

Men rushed everywhere. Basilas blocked a probing thrust from a tribesman. The man spun his blade, but its length made the motion slower, and Basilas jabbed into the opening.

His blade cut into the man's shoulder. No armor protected these tribesmen. But the barbarian was quick, turning away and fighting through the pain of the injury bravely.

The long sword swung horizontally out of his spin and Basilas was forced to pull Pothos back for a block. His sword arm shuddered from the

impact and he took a step back.

But again the long sword of the Sarissa played against him. He snarled into Basilas's face, long hair askew and matted with sweat. But there was no follow-up to his attack. The blade had no room to counter this close in. Basilas regained his footing. He feigned a shove, then ducked under the blade and reversed the duel.

The Sarissa tripped and skittered to his right. Basilas followed and hacked at a shoulder and then down on a leg. The enemy collapsed and Basilas kicked the sword away with his boot before stabbing down at the defeated man's exposed throat.

When the prima captain straightened, he found the banner of Wing Talon just before him. He'd reached his desired position, if a little slower than desired.

The rest of the Sarissa in this breach were slowly being pushed back or cut down by the organized reserved spearmen. Belgadans filled the hole in disciplined order. The prima captain put his back to that portion of the fight and focused on his left.

Here the rebels crashed against Basilas's line. Shields crunched against shields. Men shoved their opposites and boots dug into the ground. Where the right-side fighting held the clanging of steel and wild screams from the tribesmen, this section was grunts and bellowing calls to hold the line over the scrum of the stalemate.

But the rebels were slowly gaining ground. Basilas couldn't see the changing of the line. The two shield walls seemed even. But he sensed his side's growing weariness. The prima captain sprang into action to combat the issue.

He moved along the back of the frontline talon. Ducking around the corner of the talon, he ran deeper into the formation as an enemy javelin volley crashed overhead.

He noticed a clear bow in his line now. The rear of Wing arced from the center. Basilas spotted a banner holding a fist clenched around the handle of a hammer to mark one of his reserve talons. Upon arrival, he pointed the men forward.

“Press here, for weight. We must hold.”

Shields unlimbered and the men marched into the rear of Wing’s fighting. A horn sounded and Basilas was pulled along with the new crush of men.

The curve in the talon straightened, strengthening with the added ranks. The ground reverberated under Basilas’s feet as the tide shifted.

He pulled himself out of the flow and drifted through the crush of men as best as he could. He shoved with the shields where he needed and lent his to a scrum for a long while when the crush of rebels bit against them. Eventually he broke free out the back of Blade Talon and gained free air.

He now worried about his opposite flank.

Looking right, to the north where his center fought, he found the battle a whirlwind. Tribesmen spun behind the slashes of their long swords and loyalist legionnaires hid behind shields and took the brunt of the attacks and countered with quick thrusts and kicks and shoves that kept the barbarians at bay. The men defended well, but the integrity of their line couldn’t hold forever against the barbarian enemies.

Basilas was farther back than he’d been before and there were Sarissa through his main line tearing into his second row of talons with small

contingents of tribesmen. The company needed to end these incursions and reform.

With a snarl, Basilas burst back into a run. He pushed straight through his center-rear and kept an eye out for any tribesmen that broke through. A Sarissa soon did, but Basilas ducked under the wild swinging attack and slashed across his stomach with Pothos, not slowing to see the effects of his attack.

There was a growing burning in his legs. Basilas kept up speed. His armor was heavy and his neck strained under the weight of his helmet. He ran on.

The signal corps was in disarray, but the central banner of the First was still held high, tatters flapping in the wind and flicking shadows across the field. Basilas skidded to a stop before them. A few of the men saluted, but most were too distracted by the close and dire fighting.

“Signal!” Basilas yelled the word to gather the full attention of the group. “We commit the third line, Hammer and Ax make ready to advance.”

The prima captain left the signalers to their job and ran on to the rear. He would find Sergeant Atras commanding his sapper talons and give them the orders himself in addition to the signals he’d just relayed. That would ensure the full army had the information it needed and they could push back these rebels.

But he found the rear of his army already advancing. The engineers had already taken the initiative to reinforce on their own. Basilas spotted Atras’s bearded face leading his men forward in a charge, legionnaire shields unlocked and legs churning at speed. All the men around the sergeant snarled out red-faced war cries. Atras’s own mouth was closed, his

expression somehow still passive. The sappers rolled through a pocket of Sarissa like an avalanche high in the Cyna Mountains.

Basilas slid to a stop again behind the attack. Atras leaped on the back of a taller barbarian and took the man down. The prima captain grinned. He glanced back to the east to ensure there were no sappers lagging behind and then reversed course and charged with the brave talons.

He pressed into the full crush of the battle, his men reforming around their leader. They slashed and shoved the tribesmen. Shields bashed bodies backward and pummeled those already down. Basilas felt the momentum building for his side and let it grow all on its own.

But the legion staggered forward suddenly, like a fighter who'd whiffed with a thrust, perplexingly finding his opponent not where he expected. Basilas puzzled at what had occurred but soon put the pieces together just as his men held back their fury and reformed.

The Sarissa attack was faltering.

No, Basilas realized as he strained to see over the mass of helms and hacking swords. The Sarissa retreated.

He marched forward, ducking under and around pockets of fighting and the dying Sarissa still trapped within the fray. Up ahead, the front line solidified into brokenness. The barbarian ranks, the entire rebel right side, collapsed. Basilas still had limited visibility, but it appeared the Sarissa rear had fallen away, as if they'd planned this retreat.

"Hold!" Basilas yelled even as other officers throughout the formation called out "Advance!"

Basilas didn't want to overextend. The company stumbled after the enemies they'd been shoving against who'd suddenly given way. This

looked like a ruse of the enemy to draw them forward and out of position. Or the Sarissa were betraying Zagros's cause.

Either way, Basilas's men could easily charge out of position and into dangerous territory.

But even as further caution pushed against this hope, he caught a glimpse of the full chaotic rear of the tribesmen. The Sarissa fled in a mass and broke out wide to the north, moving in a great cloud for the eastern horizon. They'd never engaged their full force.

Basilas would gladly take what they left.

"Forward! Wall down! Advance!"

There was still danger, but the prima captain saw his opening. His first-line shield wall fell apart and the company tore forward. The remaining Sarissa were truly cut down and trampled by the boots of the Belgadans. The company swarmed up the right flank of the battle. Basilas went with them and eyed how to break left and attack the rebel legionnaires.

His left-flank talons needed support against Zagros's true force. Basilas led his central talons up on the left flank and found a disorganized row of rebel legionnaires standing shieldless and blinking in shock.

"Attack! Break them!"

The company screamed forward. There was no shield wall. Only a mass of swords. Basilas lent his own voice to the war cries as they hacked into the surprised reserves of the rebels.

Everywhere before them, the enemy fled or was cut down. The metal of Pothos gleamed through a sheen of blood. Basilas held the blade aloft and waved his men onward.

They reached the rebel camp, or at least a picket line, and the talons rolled through the obstacles like a charging gryphon. The men were lions,

jaws wide, teeth gleaming. They chomped into Zagros's position with furor.

The main fighting was now on the left. The First needed to come around and push toward Gaius's central fighting.

Loyalists swarmed, crawling over mounds of fresh rubble and bodies. Basilas roared and ran with them and hacked out at the fleeing rebels and those few enemies who tried to resist. There was no stemming the tide of this new flank.

Around a bundle of collapsed tents, Basilas's men came upon a ballista. The artillery piece was turning, pushed by a crowd of men with a bolt already notched into its firing contraption. The loyalist momentum cut into the workers before the piece could be set.

A rebel slashed down on the rope of the firing mechanism with his sword just as a spear pushed into his gut. The bolt careened to the left, well off target, blowing through the center rebel fighting contingent.

Basilas slashed at a fleeing rebel. He stumbled over a body. Pushing himself straight, he only barely brought Pothos around to block the sword of another rebel. This enemy tried to flee after his failed attack, but Basilas stepped into his path.

Spinning, the rebel broke in another direction. Basilas swung Pothos low and cut the back of the man's legs. The rebel tripped but maintained his feet with a grimace. He twisted again and thrust out twice in desperation with his short sword. Basilas spun Pothos to parry both attacks.

The duel would've continued and the rebel officer, even injured, could've been a fine match for Basilas's skill. He was probably a noble-born lieutenant, but he'd lost his ranking stripes on his shoulders in the fighting.

None of that mattered as the rest of Basilas's company crashed through their location. The loyalists ripped by Basilas on both sides and the enemy officer was knocked to the side before being trampled, screaming, by the crush of boots.

Basilas slowed to a more reserved pace than the rest. There would be no stopping his front ranks in their furious chasing of the enemy. But he needed the company to slow down.

Fighting to calm his heavy breathing, Basilas sought to clear his head. The Sarissa had abandoned Zagros, the enemies-turned-allies shifting to foes once more. The battleground spun around Basilas, but he held to that truth. Zagros had been betrayed.

“To me!”

The prima captain needed to link with Gaius. They could destroy these enemies who'd rebelled against Talia and the empire here and now.

Basilas continued calling and held Pothos up to sparkle red in the sun. He ran to his right, through the flow of his men and yelled for them to rally to him. They would push on in their desecration of the rebel army.

Chapter 29

Gaius's horse stood unsteady underneath him. The beast kept startling at the sounds of battle and the crack of ballista bolts and flapping of wings overhead. The general wished he could switch to Volgus.

Soon, Gaius said to himself.

The thought probably came from Volgus in the sky above, Gaius knew. Their thoughts often felt the same and were completely aligned after flying together for so long. Luckily, the gryphon wasn't the jealous type and the general could mount a horse when needed. It helped for the soldiers to see him sitting strong on horseback when he couldn't be in the air above.

Gaius tugged on his reins and tried to hold his grounded mount in position, only partly succeeding. He scanned over the crumbling rebel ranks and tried to focus.

The Sarissa retreated. That was the only explanation for how quickly First Company had dismantled them. Zagros's allies had betrayed him. Gaius's heart lifted and the tension in his neck and shoulders released, if only partly. There was still a battle to be won.

"Pull the Third in from the left," Gaius said to the aides below him. "Which talons are there?"

"Wing through Tail, sir."

"Bring them all. We're pivoting from the right. The rebels will break."

Gaius pulled his eyes back to the north and observed First Company swarming across the flank. The rebel center held plenty of soldiers and the

momentum from the sudden turning of the northern fighting would slow at some point. The general needed to react and support his prima captain.

Wind cracked overhead as two gryphons barreled by. They were flying fast, but Gaius thought he recognized the gryphon being chased as a loyalist. That was a reminder that all his men were still in danger.

The general took a breath and continued.

“The other half of the Third on the right is to push forward. They need to maintain contact with Basilas’s attack.”

Signals changed with banners rising and falling and swapping places. A single horn sounded from the right.

“We need a full advance from the center. The Fifth and Sixth are to push up behind the Second. Seventh swings wide to the left. What news from our cavalry?”

“Holding, sir. Only skirmishing.”

A new voice came in next, a runner from the left. Gaius’s horse startled underneath him, but he yanked the reins back to face the new arrival and hear the message.

“The Sarissa flee!” the messenger said. “Their cavalry is already away!”

Gaius smiled. He couldn’t stop the expression. That confirmed the Sarissa betrayal. The Fifteenth needed to grab this victory in a firm grip. He nodded to the men below him.

“Mobilize,” he said. No further directions were needed.

The general swung off his horse but didn’t advance with the rest of his reserves. He marched instead against their flow, seeking space. Volgus sensed his movements and swept to the rear from the gryphon duels. But as he settled on a flight path to land, his rider stiffened.

Gaius didn't have a magical extra sense like his mount. Volgus could feel things through his allied gryphons and his eyes could see farther across the battlefield. The general only had his veteran intuition, but that was enough in this case.

Turning, he faced the danger. Zagros flew with Naxos. The rebel barreled over his fleeing army and bore straight toward where Gaius waited to be picked up by his mount. There were no other loyalist gryphons to block the approach. The allies were all preoccupied with their own duels. The enemy had a clear shot into attack.

Volgus cupped his wings to accelerate his dive. He touched down far from Gaius and bounded to close the distance. Gaius reached out and found the top of the saddle harness over the blur of the gryphon. Volgus didn't slow. He didn't wait for the general's grip to improve. He launched back into the air and yanked his rider with him.

They tilted. Volgus reached his wing out and up to lift his rider fully onto the saddle. This slowed their takeoff and allowed Naxos to close. Gaius still wasn't completely in the saddle, but Volgus jolted downward, the rebel gryphon ripping over them. Gaius nearly tumbled backward before his gryphon righted himself. They dropped lower over the battle and arced around to the north. Naxos gave chase.

The general managed to get both legs down on either flank. He kicked around and found the stirrups as Volgus executed a weaving evasion, swinging side to side with wide and sweeping turns. The battle passed below them. The Sarissa were gone, the right flank open. Basilas hooked around and now slammed across the entire right flank of Zagros's legion. The rebels crumbled.

The enemy general had lashed out with his gryphon in desperation. He struck at the head of the loyalist army. Kill Gaius and perhaps a victory could be salvaged.

Desperate measures never worked.

Volgus drew his attacker back over the main fighting. There was no support from infantry below and the loyalist artillery was trained on the fleeing rebels, getting off the last few salvoes before the retreat was out of range.

There were other aerial duels around them, falling and rising and twisting about. Gaius ducked under one such fight that passed close over Volgus's path. Naxos was undeterred by this brief blockage and flapped harder to close in on Volgus's tail.

Gaius realized his mount was lagging. Confused, the general glanced around, scanning for blockages. But nothing nefarious met his eye.

The answer came by way of Volgus pivoting to the west and dropping low. They hurtled over the retreating rebels, but the gryphon ignored the enemies. They pressed over the remains of the rebels' broken camp. There was scattered debris here from fallen tents and collapsed structures.

Volgus dropped a final bit and sacrificed his speed for his ploy to push off his attacker. Naxos lunged just as Volgus lowered his claws and gripped a pile of canvas and wood. The loyalist flung the debris behind him. It scattered in a rain of splinters and shrapnel.

Naxos screeched, frustrated.

Gaius looked back as Volgus climbed for higher altitude. The enemy mount spun off course but was uninjured. He maintained most of his flying speed and careened below them. Volgus had shifted to attack.

Another loyalist gryphon pressed on Naxos's flank. As Volgus dived, Naxos's head twisted between his two opponents, assessing the situation. No doubt the gryphon knew his army was defeated, that he been betrayed by the feeble agreement with the Sarissa allies. He understood his rider's hopelessness.

Perhaps he understood that he'd betrayed his empire. Was he blinded by his loyalty and his bond with Zagros?

The answer didn't matter, as always in war. The victors chose what was important to history.

Naxos pulled in his neck and ruffled his feathers. He gave a single screech and then turned his back on the battle. He flew east as Volgus's ally, who Gaius now saw was Ptolemas, swept across his tail.

Zagros fled in front of his army. He and his gryphon retreated at full speed to save their own lives and leave their legion of defeated rebels behind. Gaius darted his eyes over the entire scene, moving from south all the way to the north. Dust billowed skyward on the far left from the Sarissa cavalry galloping back to their hills. Infantry fled in chaos. The camp was in shambles.

Volgus spun them back to face the brunt of the retreat. There were still gryphons fighting in the sky. The general's great gryphon spread his wings and gave a caw. Gaius snapped the reins and they flung back to the battle to support his brave legionnaires.

* * *

Volgus and Gaius barreled across Martius's vision as Avorian chased a pair of rebels. The enemies split and drew the rider's full attention back and his gryphon darted to follow the target heading south.

The enemy mounts all evaded now, their allies on the ground fled and the full battle broken. There were still some war mounts lashing out, but that was rare and only to gain space and maneuver to flee west. Martius looked back to track Volgus and determine his general's direction.

The rider had seen Gaius chased by Zagros and Naxos a moment before. Now they were clear and the rebel general was nowhere in sight.

Martius closed his eyes and fell into the embrace of Avorian's bond. The gryphon kept his focus on his current pursuit but pushed out with half of his thoughts to let Martius sense the full battle. It was brief, merely a flash, but the air captain felt the status of all his gryphons at once.

None were injured. Some were more fatigued than others and a few were still locked in duels with gryphons tight on their tail, but most held the upper hand against their rebel mounts.

The enemy pushed south and angled west, flapping hard in full retreat. Martius pulled on the reins and his gryphon reluctantly obeyed the order to return to the main fighting.

It only took a few flaps for Avorian to link back up with the full air corps. He easily found a target where assistance was needed. Phalas rolled away from a rebel swipe but maneuvered into the path of another enemy. Avorian angled in to help, but another blockage loomed suddenly.

A wedge formation barreled in from the west. Five gryphons, all rebels, a familiar outline leading the point of the attack.

Hoplas.

The rebels were defeated, that much was clear from the grounded fighting. But their air cavalry still held superior numbers and could hurt the loyalist ability to chase down the fleeing infantry. Hoplas and his attacking wedge soared over the aerial duels and angled straight for Avorian.

Martius's mount slowed. He gave a slight nod of his head, acknowledging the enemy strategy. Then he set about to destroy them.

Avorian flapped to gain altitude and speed. Hoplas followed, but his wingmen were lesser gryphons and had trouble with the increased speed. Martius saw Goras flick his hands out and send the lesser mounts away to attack the other loyalists.

The loyalist mount had succeeded in his ploy to break apart the wedge. Now he only had to duel Hoplas.

Avorian dived, turning in flight to create a twisting whirlwind of a descent. Hoplas followed but soon lost his tight hold on the loyalist's tail. The loyalist pushed away and swung around as the rebel drifted off target. The duel reversed. Martius held onto the saddle by pinching his legs and wrapping the reins twice around his knuckles. All the world spun. Land merged with sky.

Avorian straightened, as did Martius's vision a moment later. They now flew after Hoplas, but instead of seeing the rebel's tail, Goras and his mount's faces were snarling and hurtling straight for them.

Avorian buckled in the air, bringing his wings in tight and rolling. Hoplas lunged with outstretched talons through the open space vacated by the loyalists only moments before. Avorian twisted and raked his own claws across the wing and flank of his opponent.

Screeching. Perhaps a human yell carried off by the rushing wind. Then silence.

They passed. Open air. Avorian spun. Martius's vision blurred once more but soon focused on Hoplas falling away from them and slouching to one side in flight. The loyalist mount gave chase.

The rebel Goras leaned from his saddle and assessed the damage. Blood dripped down from Hoplas's flank. The gryphon craned his neck to check on Avorian's pursuit. The loyalists sped to close the distance between them.

Hoplas flipped forward to drive straight for the ground. He nearly rolled through vertically and tossed Goras from the saddle, but the rebel air captain held tight with one hand, the rest of him flailing out of the saddle.

Avorian struggled to match the maneuver. He chose to bank in another twisting dive. Hoplas lifted from his descent and the two beasts came together, the rebel lashing at Avorian's now exposed flank. The loyalist tilted and brought in his left wing to evade the attack path.

The two sides swept by each other once more. Avorian's rear drifted under Martius to the left at the last moment. There was a jolt. The rider turned to find one of his gryphon's hind legs kicked out, striking Goras in his tenuous hold to Hoplas. The rebel was knocked out into the open sky.

Martius was pulled away by Avorian's flight. Hoplas buckled, but the gryphon was unable to slow to catch his rider. Goras flailed and dropped out of sight.

Avorian kept up his speed and made a wide, banking turn. By the time Martius next found his enemy, Goras was a broken heap among the hundreds of fallen bodies strewn across the battlefield below.

Hoplas screeched a broken wail. Avorian drifted toward the ground a safe distance away. The rebel landed and slunk slowly toward his bonded rider. He knew the evil man's fate. He would've felt the breaking in his

bond already. But he seemed to want to delay confirmation and hold on to disbelief.

Avorian touched down, continuing to give the enemy a wide berth.

Martius straightened in the saddle. He'd seen gryphons mourn before, the first being Avorian at the death of his previous rider when they'd first met. But Hoplas's grief boiled in the air, like heat flickering off desert sand.

Hoplas lowered his head to nudge his broken rider. Then he rocked his head back and forth. Goras wasn't going to rise again.

Martius slid off the side of Avorian and pulled his last foot from the stirrup and returned to solid ground. Unsure of his intentions, he took a single step forward. The wind howled above and his heart pounded against his ears.

There wasn't a protocol here. The glorious stories he'd admired in his childhood hadn't focused on civil war, let alone the moment when Belgadan struck down a fellow Belgadan. This wasn't a shining, triumphant victory. Martius instead felt cold.

Avorian stepped closer to his rider. The flickers of emotion radiating off Hoplas changed. The gryphon shook. The air might as well have been crackling with storm clouds brewing overhead. He took a step back from the body of his rider. Looking up, he glared at the loyalist pair before throwing open his beak and unleashing a screech.

Martius stumbled against Avorian's side. His hands went to his ears and he shuddered against the assault.

When the screech ended, his mount stalked forward. Avorian spread out his wings to block Hoplas's view of Martius. The loyalist gryphon stamped the ground with a front claw and dropped into an aggressive stance, legs bent and tense and ready to spring forward.

Hoplas narrowed his eyes, the scar down his face nearly fitting together. This gryphon wasn't in mourning. He prepared to attack. He wanted vengeance.

Hoplas launched, leaping straight upward.

Hoplas sought to gain higher air, but Avorian undercut him by springing forward. The loyalist bolted underneath the rebel and Hoplas was forced to twist out of the beginnings of his dive and track the lower path.

Martius's mount swung around and gained altitude rapidly before banking high above Hoplas's fluttering. The rebel executed a roll and took away his opponent's attacking angle. Avorian couldn't turn quick enough at his high speed and had to sweep out his wings to brake before drifting too far off course.

Hoplas pivoted and angled for Martius on the ground. He broke from Avorian and forced him to follow, attacking what he held most dear, what Hoplas himself had just lost.

The rebel screeched, all triumph and rage. Martius drew out his sword. He looked over the landscape around him. There were only dead bodies and no places to hide. His tiny blade would do little against a great gryphon.

But Avorian slammed into Hoplas's flank in flight. The loyalist's head speared the rebel's hind quarters and the two gryphons spun with their talons locked and beaks snapping before slamming into the dirt.

The breasts wrestled, rolling over bodies and debris and kicking up dust. Martius stood with his sword out to his side, helpless, and watched. He lost sight of his mount. Wings and claws thrust but were swept aside and the snarling and screeching combined together with the clacking of blade-like beaks.

Avorian kicked out of the fray. Hoplas followed tight on his tail. The rebel lunged and tried to latch onto Avorian's back, but the loyalist evaded with a low roll. Hoplas bounded back and swiped at his opponent's face, but the loyalist dropped his neck under the attack.

Avorian shoved Hoplas away with a wing. The rebel countered by slashing with his other claw. Avorian screeched and barreled into the scarred enemy. He lowered his head, thrusting under Hoplas's chest and then flinging upward. The rebel was jolted up and backward to slam onto the ground. Avorian followed with his full weight.

Hoplas kicked with his hind legs and flung Avorian head over tail across the field. The rebel righted himself and bounded after his prey. Avorian landed on his feet and feigned one direction and swept back the other way. This unsettled Hoplas's feet, throwing him off balance, and the loyalist used the opening to knock him to the side with a shoulder barge.

Hoplas rounded again with a quick counter and Avorian parried away his two front claws. The loyalist bit into the rebel's shoulder with an outstretched beak and kicked away in the same motion, taking a bundle of feathers and blood with him.

The war beasts circled each other. Hoplas shook off his latest wound. Martius took a breath. Both beasts ruffled their feathers and spread their wings. Then they attacked again, screeching as they clawed into each other.

The two smashed together and Avorian thrust high and knocked Hoplas to the ground. A free claw raked along Hoplas's flank even as the rebel uppercut with a talon of his own against Avorian's chest.

Both beasts screeched and slunk away but quickly turned and advanced once more. Avorian flapped up off the ground and jumped over Hoplas. The rebel rolled in response. They exchanged claw swipes, Martius suddenly

seeing them as two sparring partners in a legionary camp who'd thrown away practice swords and were flailing with angry bare fists.

But these war beasts had long knives for talons and each blow shed more blood than the last. A screech cut through the fray. Martius hadn't seen the slash within the chaos. Avorian bounded away and Hoplas didn't follow. The rebel sat back on his haunches and slumped his shoulders, his head low and wings tucked in tight.

Avorian prowled and kept one eye on his opponent. He limped back to Martius's position and took up sentry.

Hoplas didn't offer any more snarls or rash attacks. He kept his eyes down and heaved in a few breaths, as if unable to fill his lungs properly. The once mighty visage of the great gryphon was torn asunder. His feathers were askew and red streaked down his brown fur. His wings, although tucked in beside him, were clearly bent in many painful places. Avorian didn't look any healthier, but he held his head high.

The rebel stood. Avorian tensed, but his opposite merely turned his back and padded away. The beast returned to where Goras had originally fallen. Martius flashed back to long ago in the north and saw Avorian gingerly picking up Tyus after the rider had fallen on that faraway hilltop. Hoplas did the same with his rebel rider. He let out a series of soft caws that could only be likened to a whimper.

Martius was surprised to feel tugs on his heartstrings at this noise. Avorian felt pity as well. If Hoplas had merely retreated after his rider fell, the loyalists would've let him go. He didn't want to hurt another gryphon. He didn't want to fight anyone. Martius and Avorian were finished with war if only it would leave them alone.

Hoplas picked up Goras with his claws and flapped into the sky, flying low south before breaking to the southeast in an unsteady line.

He made for Mount Cyna to mourn, Martius thought to himself. Avorian agreed through their bond as he watched their enemy disappear into the smoldering horizon.

Chapter 30

“We’re going to have to march soon.”

The sun rose over the tired Fifteenth. Martius looked over his shoulder at the glowing horizon and then back to the air captain who’d spoken.

“You aren’t marching, Anshas,” Clavius said.

“Yeah, you get to fly,” Martius added.

“It’s still tiring.” Anshas gave a shrug.

Atras, silent as ever, crossed his arms and glared at Anshas. He was the only one among the four who would march on foot as the Fifteenth pursued the remaining rebels.

Martius pointed at the engineer. “The sappers do all the work for you, Anshas.”

The four men stood just outside the camp as it was deconstructed. Their legion wasn’t in too big a hurry. The morning seemed a slow one after so many rushing to battle.

Avorian padded up to the group. He greeted each in turn, his own rider last. Anshas patted the great gryphon on the head. Clavius touched his forehead to the gryphon’s beak. Then Avorian reached Atras and didn’t get a reaction. The gryphon took a step back and tilted his head, looking down at the small sapper. The men merely grinned behind his thick beard.

“He’s looking for snacks,” Martius said with a roll of his eyes.

“He always wants food,” Anshas said.

At last, Avorian came to his rider's side and rested on his hind legs. The mount had recovered from his battle with Hoplas. Martius had cleaned the mount as best as he could and the long scrapes through feathers and fur had begun their healing process. They were already stitching themselves back together.

The rider reached out and rested a hand on Avorian's wing. The gryphon shuddered briefly, content, if still a little hungry.

"We'll probably still lose this war," Anshas said.

"What are you talking about?" Clavius said. He pointed east. "Were you not in the air yesterday? We won. They fled."

"That Zagros is still out there."

"True. But Martius took out Goras, remember?"

"You did?" Anshas turned and stared wide-eyed at Martius.

The lead rider didn't answer. Sometimes he didn't know where the dour air captain's attention went. All the Fifteenth's gryphon riders had been present at the battle's debrief. Everyone should know the rebel status and the approaching end of this civil war.

Through his friend's comical lack of awareness, a cloud rumbled over his mind. Memories of Hoplas and Avorian rolling over the top of dead infantrymen flashed. Their screeches and cries and Goras lying crumpled from his fall in the dirt echoed. Everything swirled and mixed with older memories of the fighting throughout his long months in the legion.

Martius wanted to be finished.

The rider missed Talia and wanted to return to the capital and find a quiet space away from weapons clanging and gryphons soaring over bloodied battlefields. He was no longer a naïve child reading about war. He'd experienced it.

Martius had seen the underbelly of the Empire. He knew now what nobles like Zagros were about. Men like Gaius and Basilas and gryphons like Avorian and Volgus were the exception.

The air captain looked up from his fog and observed Clavius and Anshas arguing once more. Atras kicked at a rock at his boots and acted aloof.

These were his friends.

They were worth fighting for.

As was Princess Talia.

Empress Talia. Martius forced himself to use the new title.

She merited all the hardship in the world. If there was another war needed, Martius would fight it. If another Goras and Hoplas waited for him, he and Avorian would fly straight into the challenge.

His mount's head twisted to the left and Martius followed the direction. A gryphon returned from scouting and set his wings for landing just in front of Martius's position. Bagoas and Phalas had the morning scout.

Avorian stood and padded alongside Martius as the rider left his friends behind, still arguing over something trivial, and went to meet the returned rider.

Bagoas dismounted after landing. Phalas followed Avorian to bound in a large circle. The mount was one of the few gryphons who'd indulge Avorian in his games. The great gryphon darted away from the lesser beast and then swung back closer to him and nudged him with a shoulder. Clacking their beaks, the two mounts ran on.

Martius ignored them. Something in Bagoas's eyes told him his report was serious.

“I found a gryphon. Dead,” the rider said. “Southeast, short flight. He’s in a dip in the land, so I almost missed seeing him.”

“Who was it? Was there a rider?” Martius’s mind raced now with something to focus on.

Bagoas shook his head. “I didn’t approach. Could be a trap, you know?”

Martius pursed his lips, but he agreed with the caution. “Thank you, I’ll fly forward. Send for General Gaius.”

The air captain snapped his fingers and Avorian darted to his side, sensing the urgency. Martius climbed into the saddle and they took to the sky without further orders given. The mount relayed their position to the other gryphons. Volgus would be among those and Martius guessed he and Gaius would be along just behind them, even if Bagoas didn’t find them himself.

The scout’s hesitancy to approach the downed gryphon was merited, as the rebels could set traps on their retreat. But in Martius’s mind, the rebels were finished. Anshas was correct that the Fifteenth hadn’t captured or killed Zagros. But the rebel legion would hardly be in a state to put up a fight now, let alone retreat much further.

Avorian was informed of the exact position of their destination from his connection with Phalas. The great gryphon headed straight for the slight dip in the land that held the body of the rebel mount. Martius half expected it to be Hoplas, with his memories still flickering of the broken great gryphon flying unsteadily away from the battle. But as they approached, he found a different mount.

The rider and gryphon circled, scanning the surrounding land and trying to feel for an ambush. But Avorian grew impatient and dropped into a quick landing to one side of the gully. Martius dismounted and drew out his

sword. Avorian walked in front of him, head low and eyes scanning for danger.

None appeared. There was only the mound of the dead gryphon.

Martius kept his weapon up as he approached the beast's head. He wouldn't recognize all the enemy mounts they'd fought against and there was no rider to be identified. Most likely, this beast had fled the field already injured after his rider's death. Heartbroken and bleeding, the gryphon had made it as far as he could before falling.

He'd died alone.

This gryphon had been Martius's enemy. The beast had flown against his air captains; he'd probably tried to strike down Anshas and Clavius and their gryphons with malice. And yet Martius still hurt deep within his chest. This wasn't the Belgada he'd envisioned. This wasn't the mighty and just empire, projecting stability across the entire world.

The wind picked up and rustled the dry feathers of the beast. One plucked off and drifted across the dirt of the gully before being picked up and flung up into the cloudless sky. The beast had been a light brown, a pretty hue, but was now speckled with dirt and blood.

This was wrong.

The thrum of wings drifted to Martius's ears. Another gryphon approached, but from the northeast. An ally.

The rider stepped away from the body and waited. Avorian paced the scene in a wide arc, averting his eyes from the fallen gryphon.

Soon the outline of a great gryphon appeared and landed in the gully. It was Volgus carrying Gaius. The general dismounted and strode up to Martius.

"Who is it?"

“I don’t know.” Martius could only grimace behind his words.

Gaius bit his bottom lip and stared at the body. He then approached with jilted steps, as if needing to force his legs into the action.

“I think it’s Otanes.” But then the general shook his head. “I can’t be sure. He’s dirty.”

Martius recognized the name. Otanes was of the Ajax line. A legendary pedigree wasted.

The rider briefly remembered seeing the mount at Carnassus when Zagros initially stole the captured gryphons and started the war.

“This is sad,” Martius said.

“It is.” That was all Gaius offered at first. Then, “Did you spot the retreat at all?”

Martius shook his head. He found he couldn’t form further words. With a swallow, he cleared the blockage and his thoughts poured forth as if from a waterfall.

“We killed Goras. He attacked us at the very end. Hoplas wanted to hurt Avorian.” Martius waved a hand behind him as if casting out the memories that would leave him. Gaius knew all this already. But he wanted to talk. “I feared I’d lose Avorian, lose my own life, lose all my friends and the legion and Talia and everyone. I used to want glory more than anything, danger too. I wanted adventure and thought war would offer it. I thought we’d be fighting real enemies, not Belgadans. I was wrong.”

Gaius faced the rider. His pensive expression suddenly fell to a serious frown. He stepped closer but remained silent.

“I’ll fight on for the empress, and for you, sir,” Martius continued. He glanced back to Otanes’s fallen form. “But I don’t see the point of all this

bloodshed and loss. What does all this matter if nobles are always going to rebel and kill each other for power?”

“I agree.”

Gaius’s response shocked Martius. He’d expected the general to shun him, to reprimand him for speaking out against the empire and the legion. But there was understanding behind the veteran’s eyes and Martius’s spirit lifted at the surprising empathy.

“I was finished with war long ago, before my brother even rebelled against Titus the first time.” Gaius heaved in a heavy breath. “But if we don’t fight, who will?”

The question was rhetorical, but Martius still sought an answer that wasn’t there.

“Terrible things happen in war. We”—Gaius pointed back and forth between both of them—“are forced into awful actions. But they keep the future safe, or at least they should. I’m finished fighting, too, Martius, have been for a decade. But Zagros and my brother and all the other enemies are still out there. I’ll take a few more horrible deeds to protect Talia’s reign.”

Martius understood. All a good legionnaire could be was decisive and loyal. Martius was close to losing his drive. But if Gaius could hold to the path across his long career, so would the young rider.

“The end is close. It has to be,” Martius said.

Gaius smiled and the warmth of the expression filtered through to Martius and gave him strength.

“The end is close,” Gaius agreed. He looked at the fallen gryphon. “We’ll get a pallet out here and move him for burial. We need to locate the gryphons and the infantry march. There might be more dead we find. And Zagros could still have a surprise or two for us.”

Martius chewed on his lip for a moment while he thought. Avorian padded back up to his side, ready for their next action.

“More of their gryphons will be alive. We took out a few riders, like Otanes’s.”

“They’ll be mourning. Mount Cyna is close.” Gaius looked west. The haze of massive mountains was barely visible.

“Should we go after them? Once we find the rest of the rebel force, of course.”

Gaius shook his head. “No, they’ll come back on their own.”

Martius remembered how Ptolemas had returned to bond with Clavius after Demus fell in the marshes west of Carnassus. Gryphons mourned in their own way. They took their time but always came home, rebel or loyalist.

“I’ll go order the pallet. Atras should have one ready,” Martius said, swinging up onto Avorian’s saddle.

“Thank you, Martius.”

Avorian launched into the sky and they left Gaius standing vigil over the fallen gryphon. Martius looked behind him. The general became smaller and smaller, Volgus at his side, until he disappeared within the desolate and dry landscape.

* * *

Gaius’s legion buried the gryphon and kept marching, leaving the low mound of dirt of the burial site in their wake. The setting sun cast fire

across the landscape at the end of the following day. The Cyna Mountains were clear now and the Sarissa region pulled closer and closer. The rebels kept up their flight.

Gaia stood facing the burning horizon behind the distant peaks and the sounds of his infantry unlimbering for the night wafted in from behind him. The army had ceased with the normal camp fortifications to save the sappers the effort. The enemy wasn't strong enough to attack them and this last stretch of hills was empty and devoid of danger.

No other rebel mounts had been spotted after the fallen beast Martius had found. The body of the lesser gryphon had clearly shaken the young air captain and Gaius couldn't lie to himself and say it hadn't unsettled him as well. This entire war, all civil strife experienced in his life, rattled him. Rebellion seemed to be a constant state.

Now there were more challenges. The general glanced to the north. A messenger gryphon had arrived in the late afternoon. The news was old, but troubling.

Chaos in the capital. Talia had been attacked by another coup. She'd escaped, but the city was in turmoil.

There were many questions and the messenger held few answers. Everything would have to come later on that topic, however pressing it was.

The empire was completely and utterly out of control. The old rebels, Bardylis's brood, had a new grip on the empire while Gaius still chased another set of enemies in the far south. Gaius could suspect his own brother to be behind this new uprising, lurking somewhere just out of sight, as always.

Gaius stared at the ground, loose and full of rocks. Footsteps approached from behind. Volgus remained on his left, curled up at rest with

his head tucked into one flank.

“Can’t say I’m surprised.” Basilas stopped next to the general.

“No, that’s half Belgada’s problem.” Gaius glanced over to the prima captain and found his friend’s eyes on the terrain stretching westward. That was where the Fifteenth needed to focus. They needed to finish the job against Zagros first and then go to Talia.

“Need to finish these rebels,” Basilas said. Gaius was glad the two friends were of one mind. Life was easier when they could predict each other’s thoughts. “Once they reach Sarissa, they won’t have anywhere else to go, especially if the tribes are against them now.”

“I agree,” Gaius said. “And Talia heads for Lectra, apparently. She might already be there, for all we know. I hate being this far away from the capital.”

Basilas looked sideways at him. “You want to return to that city?”

Gaius scoffed and shook his head. “No. Especially not now.”

Basilas grinned. “Zagros’s end is here. We’ll find it and then pivot and fight the next battle.”

“We will,” Gaius agreed. He forced the words from his mouth.

His words to Air Captain Martius the previous day came back to the general. Conflict created hardship for everyone. It wore down the empire’s leaders and heroes most of all. But there was always another fight.

He’d seen terrible things and performed horrible deeds. He and Volgus survived and with Titus’s reign, they thought they’d brought peace to the empire. But war was always smoldering underneath. How could Gaius end this cycle?

“We’ll fight on,” he said under his breath.

“What was that?”

“Nothing.”

Well, it is something.

“We’ll march hard in the morning,” Gaius said. “Tell the men it’s only a day or two more. The remaining rebels will give up.”

“Yes, sir.” Basilas’s grin widened up the side of his face behind his mock formality.

The prima captain turned and swept back into the mass of infantry making camp. Gaius kept his eyes forward. The sun’s fire was now behind the mountains and the shades of the massive peaks turned dark and shimmered in purple shadow.

* * *

The Fifteenth found Zagros early the following morning. The rebel army didn’t lay a trap or set up for a final stand to take as many of the loyalist legionnaires with them as they could. Instead, an outrider stumbled upon the general alone, tied to a post, on top of a rise.

Gaius circled the scene on Volgus while Claw Talon from First Company secured the area. There could still be an ambush, even though Volgus’s eyes were positive the defeated general was down there completely alone.

Basilas advanced his soldiers and set a perimeter and then signaled up to Gaius that the rise was safe. Volgus dropped altitude and made a tight circle over the hilltop. Zagros tracked their flight and held his stare on them as the great gryphon hovered and lowered himself to touch down.

Wings fluttered above as the air corps stayed close. Hooves sounded down the slope behind Gaius as well. Basilas galloped up on the crest along with Captains Megaras and Graccus as Gaius dismounted. Air Captain Martius landed on Avorian to round out the group.

All the while, Zagros stared flatly at Gaius.

The general approached slowly. The rebel leader was dirty, his face smeared with muck, his once fine clothing in tatters. Sitting with his hands tied behind him to a post, he struggled to keep his chin high.

“Did the Sarissa betray you again?” Gaius couldn’t help himself. Basilas gave a slight chuckle behind him.

Zagros’s eyes narrowed and he finally looked away.

“My men,” he said. His voice was rough and he could barely form the words.

“Prima Captain, should we give him water?” Gaius asked over his shoulder.

“No.”

Gaius glared back at the man who’d caused the Fifteenth so much trouble.

“They wish to surrender, ask for clemency.” Zagros cleared his throat. “I told them they wouldn’t get it from you.”

“Your legionnaires? They might.”

Zagros looked up at Gaius, his eyes snapping back into focus from a distant gaze. The loyalist general wanted to ask the rebel why he’d started this war in the first place. Why throw Belgadan lives away?

“Am I to be led back to Belgada in chains, then?” The rebel smiled behind the question.

Gaius's face grew suddenly hot. His vision flashed red, but he quelled the feeling by clearing his throat. Volgus held a similar rage and let it simmer for a few moments longer on his end.

Zagros certainly didn't deserve clemency. He didn't deserve the chains of a defeated enemy. It had been a mistake for Consul Bardylis after his capture.

A thought struck the general and he ticked his gaze up to the sky. Finding the expanse clear, he looked to Zagros.

"Where's your gryphon?" His eyes narrowed.

Zagros shrugged, barely able to move his shoulders from his bonds.

"He left. Abandoned me. They all did."

"I've never heard of a bonded war beast doing that," Basilas said. Gaius looked behind him and caught the prima captain shaking his head. Martius held a furrowed brow as well.

"I would've been a great emperor," Zagros said, pushing past the subject. His chin lifted again and his noble face, however dirty, brightened in the sunlight. He tried to exude power even from his defeated state.

Gaius put his back to his enemy and strode to Basilas. They put their heads together.

"What do you think?"

"It's not some trick," Basilas said. "I guess his men really did turn on him. Scouts have the army positioned just north of here."

Gaius glanced in the indicated direction. "We'll see if they want to parlay. They should have new leaders. I've half a mind to give them what they want and be done with this fighting."

"What about him?" Basilas nodded to the defeated noble. "I can have Atras build a cage and we take him north."

Gaius didn't respond. He looked over the men and the gryphons who were loyal to the empire behind Basilas. Martius and Avorian had been hurt after the last battle. Megaras had been promoted after Gura when the Fifteenth lost the good captain Argos. Graccus, like all of the commanders, had lost more men than anyone could count.

Zagros didn't merit a trial. That was too merciful.

Gaius had made the mistake by being loyal to Belgada's traditions and structure. These men had rebelled against the empire. They had broken the chain of law and weren't tethered to it.

Spinning, Gaius drew his sword. He marched straight at the rebel general and swung the blade below his upturned chin.

The weapon stuck into the post with a smack. It took a moment for the head to fall away, Zagros's surprise only halfway etched on his face. The man hadn't had time to comprehend his end. And now the deed was done.

The head rolled. The rebel's body stayed upright, still tied to the post. Gaius bent and yanked his blade from the wood. He wiped the blood from it on Zagros's tunic and then walked away.

None of his men had made a sound. The only reaction was a supportive nod from Volgus. Gaius stopped before Basilas once more.

"That's what he deserved. Now let's go talk to the rest of the rebels. We'll see if they merit anything less."

Chapter 31

“**B**etter come look, sir.”

Basilas rode at the head of a column of his infantry. They chased the rebels and drew close behind them. The prima captain hoped this latest message was good news.

He stared at the outrider who'd spoken for a moment before squinting at the horizon. There was a dark mound that broke from the undulations of the foothills where the scout had ridden in from. It wasn't rounded and smooth, but unnatural looking.

“What is it?”

The first spear's question was as much for Clavius riding next to him as for anyone else. The rider's gryphon was above the march and would've already inspected the strange mound.

Clavius shook his head. “It's not bodies.”

Basilas exhaled. He glanced at the air captain and gave a nod of thanks before looking back to the outrider.

“Weapons, sir,” the man said. “You better come look.”

Basilas spurred his horse forward. Clavius fell in beside him and they followed the scout. Before the messenger, they'd been discussing what their general did to Zagros earlier in the day. Gaius hadn't allowed the legionnaires to take the rebel's body down from the post. They'd left the corpse there, unburied, to fester in the sun.

Gaius had dispatched the noble enemy without hesitation. Before this war, the general had let Bardylis live and sent him back to the capital for a trial. That had been a mistake, clearly, given the reports of the coward consul rebelling again. But now Basilas's friend had swung too far the other way.

That execution had been no different from a Sprawling settling a blood feud. Belgada was above that, especially the loyalist side. But rebellions and endless fighting dragged them down into the muck of barbarism.

The prima captain felt a twinge of embarrassment. He was doubting his general, wasn't being a supportive second-in-command. He rubbed a hand down his face. The worries remained.

They approached the mound and the rigid shadow morphed and began to sparkle. Basilas kept his horse at a steady pace, although he wanted to spur it into a gallop and reach the site as quickly as possible.

"Weapons, indeed," Clavius said from beside him.

The hill was a pile of swords and shields and breastplates plus metal skirting and steel shin guards thrown in for good measure. The weapons of the rebel army had been left as an offering to their future captors.

"They're trapped," Basilas said. "They could outrun us, sure. But they're running into the Sarissa Hills and those tribes are no longer their allies to the east. This is their army throwing themselves at our feet."

Clavius glanced back. "They won't know what Gaius did to their leader."

Basilas smirked, but there was no mirth behind the expression. It was flat and fell away quickly.

These rebels had mutinied against Zagros and tied him there, though they would've expected Gaius to take the general prisoner.

“You don’t think...” Clavius didn’t finish the question. Basilas didn’t want the air captain to.

“No.” Basilas spoke as firmly as he could manage. “I doubted Gaius back in Gura. He led us out of that mess and made up for any mistake of his that might’ve caused it. He’s a good man and a good leader.”

“As good a man as any of us can be with all this fighting,” Clavius said.

“True.” Basilas sighed. “And we’re on the correct and just side, remember?”

The Fifteenth’s belief in their cause couldn’t crumble. The prima captain had to keep his men motivated.

Clavius didn’t respond. A gryphon circled the mound of weapons as the prima captain pulled his horse to a stop. The pile cast a stretch of shade for the horses. Basilas dismounted and Clavius joined him.

A gryphon landed behind them in a cloud of dust. General Gaius emerged from the haze a moment later. Volgus followed him and circled the horses and lay down in a patch of shade closer to the rebel arms.

“They’ll surrender.” Basilas nodded to the weapons as if Gaius wouldn’t have seen them himself. “Gaius...”

Basilas’s voice trailed away on the soft wind. He couldn’t find the words that wouldn’t sound accusatory. The general put his back to the prima captain and stared at the mound.

“Clemency.” Gaius spoke under his breath. Basilas almost didn’t hear the word.

“Sir?” Clavius said.

“We’ll grant them clemency,” Gaius said with a nod. He turned and stared into Basilas’s eyes. The general understood his friend’s worries.

“They want to surrender and atone for their wrongs. They’re welcome back in the empire. We’ll need them to fight off Bardylis’s new coup.”

Basilas tried to hold his gaze steady on his commander. He forced his shoulders to stay high and not collapse with relief. They shook from the effort.

“I’ll distribute the orders. Clavius and the air cavalry will find those surrendering. Whether tonight or in the morning, we’ll have them marching in our ranks, sir.”

“Good,” Gaius said. He returned to Volgus, the gryphon standing up to greet his rider. “We need to turn northeast and head for Lectra to meet the empress.”

The general mounted and Volgus took off in another dust cloud as Ptolemas landed and made straight for Clavius. Basilas watched the general fly back east to the Fifteenth’s main position. He then glanced over the mound of weapons one more time.

“Atras will have to sort through these.” He shook his head and made a clicking sound into the side of his mouth. He looked back and found Clavius’s eyes. “You find the rebels, before Gaius changes his mind.”

The air captain was up in the saddle and kicking into the sky before the prima captain finished. Basilas climbed into his horse’s saddle as well and slowly pulled his grounded mount around to trot back to his vanguard. The sun was low in the sky already, but they could advance and begin sorting the abandoned arms as the main army caught up.

There was work to be done, but the prima captain felt distracted and listless. One image kept pounding across his head: a headless body tied to a stake. Zagros’s head rolled across the open hilltop and Gaius stood above it smiling maniacally, blood dripping from his sword.

“Even with victory,” Basilas said, “what has become of us?”

* * *

The land turned green again as the sparkle of the ocean broke the northern horizon. Martius had seen the change explode over the landscape from the air the previous evening. He and Avorian were now set to fly with Gaius and some of the other gryphon riders to arrive at Lectra before the main army column. Today, he would see Empress Talia.

“Ow!”

Avorian lunged again, beak open, but Martius flung his hand away. The beast wanted more of his snack and wouldn’t suffer Martius’s daydreams. He glared at his rider and Martius did his best to glare back and fight off the grin that threatened to break from his mouth.

Martius had made sure to scavenge for pecan groves in the Sarissa region, exploring as far afield from the army as was safe. He reached into the bag at his hip and threw another pecan in the air. Avorian snapped his neck out and crushed the nut in one bite and looked back at his rider for more.

Martius’s mind was already wandering again. He dwelt on Talia and the north and flying with her once more. Avorian could act indifferent if he wanted, but Martius had a view into his gryphon’s mind the same as his gryphon could see into his. The war beast longed to see Axias again. He was just better at hiding his anxiousness.

Martius tossed a pair of pecans into the air and Avorian deftly snapped up both of them. He trotted in a happy circle while munching on the snack and gave Martius some space to think.

The world wasn't all joy and sunshine and bright coastline. There were shadows, dark and terrible, rumbling under the surface. He'd witnessed Gaius decapitate Zagros. He'd seen Goras fall to his crumpled death. Bardylis rebelled in the capital once again and more nobles struggled for power. Over it all, Paulus's face leered.

Avorian returned and nudged into Martius's shoulder. Still distracted, the rider held out a hand with a pile of pecans and let the gryphon finish the snack. The beast was happy and sought to dominate their bonded minds with his mood. He pressed through a bright image of Axias soaring through the sky for them both to admire.

Reaching up to grab the gryphon's reins, Martius smiled. He added to the image by putting the empress on the back of her mount, hair flowing behind her and a radiant smile on her face. Their imaginations meshed and formed a beautiful scene.

"We'll see them today," Martius said, climbing into the saddle. "I'm sure she'll be busy and surrounded by advisors and working hard for the empire, but we'll see her from afar."

Avorian swallowed the last bite of his snack and leaped into the air. They flapped away from the Fifteenth's vanguard and pushed north and east. Half of the air corps was already advancing on the settlement of Lectra. General Gaius should have already landed. Martius needed to join him.

Clouds billowed in from the coastline. Bright sky turned overcast and Avorian dropped to skim just below the gray ceiling. Martius remained lost

in thought as he relished the wet air coming from the sea. It made him think on victories against other rebel legions and not the dry struggle and death found at Gura.

A shadow flicked through the clouds above them. Martius startled and twisted around just as a war beast burst from the cover. Avorian buckled and nearly threw his rider from the saddle in his surprise.

A gleeful screech swept behind them and Martius whipped his head the other direction to spy the familiar backside of a gryphon.

Axias had always loved surprises.

Laughing despite himself, Martius leaned over Avorian's neck as his war beast dived after the empress and her mount. They barreled for the sandy beaches below and swept up the countryside eastward. The delta of the great Gura River broke up the land and sparkled in the shafts of morning sun breaking through the clouds.

Talia threw a glance back at Martius, her hair wild and wavy in the wind. Both held smiles for each other, but Axias broke left swiftly and swung back to the right to break their gaze. Avorian hung on her tail, much too experienced to be fooled by such a maneuver.

Martius could feel the arrogance swelling from Avorian's chest. The thrill of the chase had already taken over. Axias may have surprised them and startled Avorian briefly, but he was a superior fighter. He was—

Axias suddenly swung up and spread her wings, slamming to almost a complete stop in the air. Avorian shuddered and barreled straight past her. He craned his neck around along with his rider and both saw Axias now on their tail and gaining with each flap of her wings.

Avorian threw out a frustrated screech but slowed his flight. Axias pulled up beside them, a sparkling across her eyes. Talia sat back in the

saddle. Martius matched her posture.

The wind howled between them and made conversation impossible. Martius wanted to tell Talia everything about the war and the adventures and the dangers he and Avorian had faced for her. He wanted to hear about the coup in the capital and the enemies she'd escaped. But for now, he merely smiled and relished being close to her.

Talia pointed them downward to land at Lectra. The town reared up on the banks of the Gura with ships anchored in the river and an imperial camp waiting for them on the outskirts.

The wind's howling fell away as they touched down and dismounted and Martius finally had the space and the silence to speak his mind. But no words came to him.

He stood there, grinning stupidly, as the empress climbed down from Axias. If this were a legendary story, he'd have something suave to say, his voice low and gravelly. His hair would be windblown and perfect and he wouldn't be dirty from weeks of marching and fighting with his legion.

"You look good," Talia said, raising an eyebrow over a smile.

Martius looked down and brushed off his tunic. "Apologies, Empress. Had I known you were going to welcome us, I would've bathed."

"You've been fighting for my empire. You're allowed to be a little dirty." Talia's smile turned to a coy smirk.

Martius couldn't help but laugh, mainly to hide his red face. He was going to respond, but Talia surprised him further and moved closer and wrapped him in a hug. The rider nearly coughed from shock but then quickly gripped the empress back. Her body was warm and small and soft and perfect.

This was happiness. The worries of his legion and Belgada fell away completely.

Talia stepped back, or at least she would've had Martius released her. He let go a moment later and stared sheepishly at the ground.

Their gryphons bounded around the open pen of the camp together. Avorian kept barging into the shoulder of Axias and knocking her off her stride. The female gryphon acted offended, turning her back up. But that would always give Avorian the opening to perform the maneuver once more.

Talia chuckled before walking to the edge of the pen. Martius followed her and fought through the fog in his mind.

"Empress," Martius said. He fumbled around for what to say. "I'm sorry."

The statement was weak and pointless. He should be telling her about Avorian's exploits and building up their combined heroics. The empress needed to know that her brave warriors were fighting for her.

"I'm glad you're safe," Martius managed to say next. Talia smiled at him and gave him an opening to continue. "I'm happy to see you. I would've never forgiven myself had you been hurt while we were all the way down here fighting the wrong enemy."

"I think Zagros was a perfectly noble enemy. Noble, literally, in the worst ways." She laughed. "Now we can turn our attention on Bardylis and his schemes."

"Oh, and thank you for the book. I enjoyed the details on the Memnas Campaign. Curia is my favorite," Martius added. He should've thanked her for the history tome straight away.

"You're welcome." Talia smiled warmly. "I'm glad you liked it."

Martius realized something was different about the empress. She leaned on the railing of the gryphon pen, but her shoulders were in a strong posture. Her eyes were hard, confident. Something within the title of empress and her experiences in the capital while Martius was away had affected her greatly.

She was now a leader. He liked the change.

“You look good, Empress.” Martius cleared his throat. The statement didn’t do her justice. “I mean, you look perfect, as always.”

Talia’s coy smirk came back and she glanced sideways at the rider. “I heard you have rebel survivors with you and that Zagros is gone. Tell me more of the fighting. How did you and Avorian fare?”

Martius hesitated, but then dived into a little detail on the fighting in Gura and then the campaign across the plain toward the Sarissa Hills. He wasn’t sure how much Talia would’ve heard before or how much she wanted to know now. He left out his fears and doubts and the struggles of the campaign, as well as the manner in which Goras and Zagros had each died. The rider made Avorian sound like the hero, not himself, as modesty seemed the appropriate approach.

Talia let him speak, but she butted in when he got to the fighting near Acab.

“Did many of the rebel gryphons survive? Which beasts are with the captured forces?”

Martius listed the names of the gryphons that he’d heard from Basilas’s report on the surviving rebels. He ticked each one off with a finger and realized there was a good group, but many were still missing.

“We found Otanes fallen during the retreat, succumbing to wounds from the battle. The others should be surviving and in mourning.”

Martius hung his head. The conversation was now depressing. He needed to put a positive spin on things.

“Gaius says the gryphons will return. They always do. That will strengthen our cause against the next rebel army.”

“It will.” Talia straightened from the fence. “Solos has said something similar to me before. It’s a mystery, but even gryphons from a rebel side return to Belgada after a time. We’ll have a lot of those after all this fighting.”

Silence stretched between them for more moments than Martius wanted. He racked his brain for what to say next and settled on the only option he could find.

“I’m sorry for all this trouble, Empress. Your reign should be peaceful after all you’ve been through.”

Talia scoffed behind a small smile. She shook her head and then looked sideways at Martius. “Ruling isn’t easy. My father was never grooming me to replace him, but he distilled that in my brother and me from an early age.”

She then ducked under and out of the pen area and Martius scrambled to follow. They fell into a slow pace through the camp. Various legionnaires and servants bowed to the empress as they passed.

“I didn’t want ultimate power. I never wanted my father’s throne. I don’t think he wanted it either.”

“That’s what makes you perfect for it, Empress.” Martius threw in a bow of his head for good measure.

Talia smiled at him. A full smile. He liked her bright teeth.

“I don’t know if that’s true, but you’re kind.” The empress stared at her riding boots as she walked. “But I thought a lot about giving up. What is all

this bloodshed worth, really? What is the point if Belgada will just always tear itself apart again and again?”

Martius didn't respond, sensing that the empress needed space to talk and think and continue walking. He merely listened and waited, knowing he held similar reservations.

“But I want to fight. I can be a good empress. I can continue my father's work. I can be his legacy.”

“Then we'll fight for you, all of us. We'll change the capital.” Martius bowed his head again and then walked with his shoulders a little higher and his back straight. The empress needed his strength to continue leading with hers.

“Thank you, Martius.” Talia reached over and gripped his hand. Martius startled at the gesture at first but then squeezed her back. The empress let go after a moment.

“It's good to be back with you, Empress. Even if we're still at war,” Martius said. There was still a spark of heat where their fingers had touched. “Avorian's happy as well, of course.”

“I think Axias is even more so. She was going crazy in the capital with all the work I had to do. War may be easier for her. She and Avorian will fight side by side and fly wherever the next campaign takes us.”

Martius nearly stopped in his tracks at her words. He hadn't thought long enough on the next campaign to even consider that Talia would remain with the loyalist army. But now that she mentioned it, he realized there was nowhere else for the empress to go. The rebels controlled the capital and the safest place for her and Axias would be with her soldiers.

“I look forward to fighting with you, Empress.” Martius smiled widely at her and she returned the gesture.

“Don’t call me empress, Martius. At least when we’re alone.” She threw out a smirk. Her teeth and lips and face were beautiful in the morning light.

They continued on through the camp and there was a burst of joy from their gryphons playing back in the pen. Martius was happy for what felt like the first time since before Zagros’s rebellion. The shadows that had plagued him earlier this morning receded. There was only brightness.

* * *

Gaius gazed through Volgus’s eyes, searching up the coastline. He watched the curve in the land heading north and the tight and flat greenery stretching inland to the east. The gryphon couldn’t quite see the Tilian River, but the fertile environment that marked the end of the Gura Desert made clear that the waterway was close.

The general took in all this but barely noticed any details. His Fifteenth would march through here, but it was not where they would fight. Gaius’s mind was elsewhere, traveling farther north than Volgus could fly in a single day, dwelling on his home, the Belgadan capital, and the men that sought to tear the great empire apart.

The rider blinked and brought his eyes back to his current location. Clouds and sky fell away and he focused on Empress Talia across the table. The command room was awash with a gaggle of officers, aides, and servants.

This was a strange gathering. Gaius knew that Titus, were he still alive, would’ve chuckled at the idea of a Scipian, a Tyrhian ship captain, and a

legionnaire general advising his daughter together. This was how the die landed for the empire. These were the heroes and leaders that would either save the loyalist cause or perish trying.

The light in the room was low and cast flickering shafts through the far west-facing window. The beams cut through the gathering, sparing neither noble Belgadan nor foreigners. A map lay on the table with a few scrolls between the commotion. Basilas shifted and leaned his weight over the map.

The prima captain had been fretting lately even after he'd settled from his worries before the Gura fight. The veteran would be loyal, Gaius knew, and a great asset in the fight to come. But he worried about the mindset of the first spear, along with all his legionnaires, after so long on campaign against endless enemies.

Gaius had shocked even himself with the execution of Zagros. But the deed was done. A legionnaire could only push forward.

"The Seventh Legion skirts the edge of the desert, heading for Carnassus or Tilina," the Scipian bodyguard Verstappas said to the empress. His voice was steady. "We're expecting word from our scouts in the north any moment now. We'll soon know where Bardylis is pushing from the capital."

"It'll be south," Halys the Tyrhian said. "My ships blockade Getae, so they can't march west."

"They certainly could, though," Basilas said.

Halys glared at him. The prima captain straightened from the table, sliding back a step.

Gaius had been surprised the barbarian captain wasn't with her ships on that blockade. She clearly liked Talia and sought to protect her. She felt

strongly enough about her role that she abandoned the sea to fight on land. To the general's knowledge, that was unheard of from a Tyrhian ship leader.

"We'll wait for the scouts to confirm," Talia said, instantly placating any tension rising throughout the room.

The empress, much like her father, inspired loyalty. In looking at her now, Gaius saw growth from only their short time apart. Something about Talia was stronger, more decisive, more determined. She met each of her advisors' gazes with a hard and confident stare.

Her empire was threatened, but she would rise to the challenge.

Gaius would rise with her.

A flickering came through his bond with Volgus and Gaius closed his eyes and drifted back to the sky. The scouting gryphons returned from the north. They relayed their findings to the other mounts as soon as they were in range.

The contingent of rebels had been spotted marching south from the capital. Gaius caught a hazy image passed from the gryphons that had lost much of its detail in the relay. It showed a dust cloud moving across the central province. The north felt dark and cold and foreign.

"They're returning now." Gaius glanced between Verstappas and Talia and his own prima captain as the gathering all turned to him. "South. They're heading to Carnassus. We must march and meet them."

The empress gave a stiff nod. She looked to Verstappas. "We mobilize and march at once. General Gaius, your legion will lead us."

Decisive. Confident. Striking out in the face of strife.

Gaius smiled and then gave a bow. Basilas followed him, as did everyone else a moment later, even the Tyrhian.

The general exited the room and marched into the work of another campaign. There were many issues plaguing the empire. Terrors would continue to haunt Gaius's mind, but he would fight for Talia. The Fifteenth had beaten Bardylis before. They would defeat him again.

And this time, Gaius's brother wasn't hovering on the periphery. The Fifteenth would crush this new uprising.

Epilogue

Empress Talia walked through the dusty camp and lost herself in thought. The Fifteenth had marched the morning previous and soon the Aptorian Guard and the rest of the loyalist contingent would join on their tail. Various gryphon riders, Martius included, flew in and out of the rear camp and Verstappas and Halys stayed particularly close to the empress's side.

These walks were her only moments of solitude. There were soldiers about, marching and packing and hauling supplies for the campaign, but Talia's mind had room to roam without advisors pressing her for decisions or pushing worries about various dangers into her head.

The new war commenced slowly after the explosion of Bardylis taking over the senate and the rush to flee Belgada. Now there would be a waiting game and a march north and a fight over ancient cities. But a feeling nagged at Talia.

She was missing something.

A big scheme. A momentous happening.

The empress reached the familiar circle of the gryphon pen but did not seek out through her bonds and call Axias to her. The great gryphon was out flying, diving low over the delta of the Gura and chasing the flashes of fish below the water's surface.

"Solos," the empress called out.

A clattering came from one of the stable rooms on Talia's right and soon a bundle of wood and pots and a feeding trough tumbled out. Somewhere within the mess was the empire's stable master.

"What were you doing in there?" Talia asked. She could see partway in the doorway now and the space Solos had occupied wasn't much more than a closet.

"Um..." Solos straightened and dusted off his tunic. "Your imperial bidding, of course."

Talia glanced at the shed and then back to the stable master without a reply.

He tilted his chin up and marched over to her position.

"What further orders do you have for your loyal gryphon keeper?" he asked.

"A question, if I may?" Talia said.

"Of course." Solos spread his hands out to either side of him.

"I had an interesting discussion with Air Captain Martius a few days ago."

"Avorian's rider," Solos cut in, smiling. "Brave soldier. Dashing, I would say."

Talia pushed aside what he implied and continued, "He mentioned that many gryphon riders fell off the rebel side. The mounts mourn, of course, but they should return in their own time."

"That's true. Martius is smart, as well as broodingly handsome." Solos gave an exaggerated wink at the empress. He still had dust and bits of seed on one shoulder.

"My question is, how long does their mourning usually last?"

Solos folded his hands and gave a frown. His stance slackened and he leaned one side. “There’s no set time. There doesn’t seem to be a reason correlating to the strength of a bond or the length of time a gryphon flew with the rider. They mourn in their own way for that specific time. Then they return to us.”

“And the gryphons from Bardylis’s first coup, those that flew behind my brother and Oxus, have they returned?”

Solos’s frown deepened. He scanned across the pen, as if expecting to see all the mounts across the empire gathered here for him to take stock of them. Not finding the answer, the stable master began to pace and mutter to himself.

“Some have,” he said after a long while. The sudden outburst startled Talia before the gryphon keeper continued in a normal tone. “But not very many. At first, I wondered where they all were, and I saw a few when I traveled to the Bastia region, but not all. You ask a good question. I wonder if this civil war has turned them away from our empire?”

A worrying thought.

“Have you ever heard of that happening before?”

Solos shook his head. “Never. But this is a strange time and the Infinities can turn in unexpected ways.”

Yes, Talia thought to herself, *quite strange*.

“Thank you, Solos.” She’d gotten the information she needed but then thought of a follow-up. She opened her mouth to speak but was cut off by loud squawking from across the pen.

“Ponderas at it again,” Solos said, whirling toward the noise. He ran from Talia without another word, yelling as he went. “Hey! Ponderas! That’s Ptolemas’s blanket! We’ve talked about this! Let him have it. Don’t

give me that look. Don't you turn your back on me. What did I just say! Hey! Stop that!"

Chuckling, Talia pushed away from the fence line and retraced her steps through the camp. She pushed past the comical scene of Solos wrestling with the gryphons and dwelt on what he'd told her. She thought through his information slowly and began to piece together a potential truth hidden behind all these wars.

Reaching her central quarters, she walked down the row past her command post until she reached a specific hut.

"Air Captain Martius?" Talia said to the legionnaire gryphon rider lounging on the porch.

Martius nearly fell out of his chair. He straightened and bowed his head.

"Empress," he said.

"Come with me. If Avorian is ready, there's somewhere we need to fly."

* * *

The landscape rolled underneath Talia as Axias soared through the clouds. Martius had given her some of the details of the fighting in this region previously and the empress thought she glimpsed the remains of a recent battle on her left as they flew into the Sarissa Hills. But their destination was more distant, drawing her focus, blacking out the horizon with its towering peaks.

She'd never traveled into the Cyna Mountains, but she knew she would recognize the central apex given its height and majesty. Mount Cyna

loomed above them as they skirted the tops of her children who clutched close around her. She was snowcapped and beautiful and stretched high into the cold, cold air.

Axias made straight for her and Avorian held tight to her wake. Flickers of gryphon flights appeared just below the snow line on the rocky slope. Talia pointed and Axias angled for the largest group.

Caves dotted the side of the mountain, breaking up the boulders leaned against each other and balanced precariously over cliffs. It was a pristine gryphon roost. If the legends were true, this mountainside was the birthplace of Belgadus, Harpalus's mount, and all great gryphons after him.

Axias set her wings and brought them in slowly. The feral mounts all looked to be of the lesser variety and scattered at the approach of the two greater beasts. Avorian broke off to the right and circled, mirroring Axias in his approach. They landed together in an open space just below a large cave mouth.

Martius dismounted as Talia looked around from her perch atop Axias.

"That's Harpagus," Martius said with a point. "His rider fell at Acab."

The war beast was tucked up under a small tree growing from a crack in the rock. The gryphon poked his head out of the shadows and took in the two new arrivals briefly before curling back up tightly around himself.

"Mourning, just as we thought." Talia scanned over the mountainside. They would need to climb and assess more of the flock. "See any others?"

Martius shielded his eyes and looked at the beasts in the air above them. "Not yet. Harpagus only just lost his rider. It's not out of the ordinary that he's still here."

"Is that Archippus?" Talia asked, suddenly pointing to a mount landing on the terrace above them.

“His rider fell at Arta months ago.” Martius started scrambling up the rock face toward where the gryphon had landed. Avorian followed him, head up and alertly scanning the surroundings.

Axias proceeded at a slower pace, though they gained the top of the slope plenty quickly and found a small clearing full of gryphons of all ages. Most of the beasts were feral, but a couple of the mounts wore saddles that marked them as domesticated Belgadan military gryphons. If a rider fell in battle, no one was left to remove it from the creatures.

“That’s Archippus all right,” Martius said. He pointed at a few of the saddled mounts in turn. “Pilas, Ephras, Agabus, unless I’m mistaken.”

Talia agreed with his assessment, even though she didn’t know all the mounts aligned to nobles by heart. The records of who the empire believed had fallen in the rebel wars so far was back in Belgada and Solos had only given them a few names.

The snap of wings passed overhead. Talia ducked over her saddle and Martius took a defensive step to Avorian. The riders then twisted around to track the new flight.

“That’s Hoplas. Avorian killed his rider at Acab.” The air captain gripped his mount’s reins and put one foot in a stirrup.

Talia eyed the air captain. Both her and Avorian were worryingly tense.

But the large gryphon in question flew on and disappeared around the mountainside.

“He won’t hold a grudge,” Talia said. “He’s grieving his rider, nothing else. He’ll return to the empire soon.”

“On which side?” Martius asked.

This was a crucial part of her plan. She could strengthen her forces by gathering all these lost mounts to her. But another question stuck within her

mind. Solos hadn't answered it, and seeing all these war beasts here only set off more issues within her plans.

"What is keeping the gryphons here? Some have been mourning for almost a year." Talia looked back over the mounts and noted that half of them should have already been returned to the capital for a new rider.

"That would be me."

The voice echoed out of the cave just up the slope, deep and loud and startling. Axias's feathers bristled and Martius gripped his sword.

A figure formed within the shadows. Avorian gave a long hiss. The man who'd spoken stepped into the full light and the visage of Paulus Cael fully materialized.

Martius drew his weapon. Axias flexed her talons. Talia blinked in disbelief. The larger schemes of her enemies clicked into place, but she stood frozen in response.

Paulus, scourge of her father and Belgada as a whole, grinned and crossed his arms in front of himself. This rebel relished their surprise. He held the high ground. He controlled these war gryphons. The renewed rebels marching against Talia were much stronger and cunning and devious than anyone thought. The traitor Paulus set his legs in a wide stance and stared down at them, hate and triumph sparkling brightly behind his evil gaze.

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Robert is a writer of fantasy stories who lives in Raleigh, North Carolina with his wife and daughters and their quirky Staffordshire Terrier. He attended UNC-Chapel Hill to study Economics and Creative Writing.

Robert has always been drawn to fantasy authors and the worlds they create— from Harry Potter and Middle Earth as a child to discovering Westeros as a teenager. He has since fallen in love with the worlds of Sanderson, Erikson, and Sapkowski (as well as many more).

When not reading and writing fantasy, Robert enjoys cheering on his beloved Tar Heels and Carolina Panthers, exploring the exquisite North Carolina craft beer scene, and feasting on his wife's fine southern cooking.

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