



The King's words echoed again and again in Emeilia's ears as she descended the spirals through the King's chambers and his lower conference room. War was coming, war against Benmesh, against his tyranny in Lehland, against all that was evil in Teluth. Finally. Almost nineteen years of Benmesh's constant harassment and feints had begun to take a hearty toll on both Vaneah and her army, the bouts of inaction more than anything. The only combat the Vanihen Army saw was self-defense and the smallest of actual attacks to take back any lost ground the army of Lehland had conquered. Over the last two decades of minor warfare, the casualties had mounted on both sides. Finally, the King saw fit to bring his strength to bear against Benmesh.

Emeilia lifted the latch to the wooden door at the tower's base and stepped back into the full light of the sinking afternoon sun. Even though she had been in the building a short time since departing the roof, she let out a sigh of relief to be back in the open air. She did not like to be in enclosed spaces, feeling trapped without escape.

She breathed in the fresh outside air, feeling the warmth on her skin. The King had said that she was to leave the first of the week—four days away. Four days for some minor work and preparations. Aside from that, she could relax and spend her days with Collan and Edward because—she tried to shut down the thought but failed—this might be her last time to see them. She forced it away and focused her mind elsewhere. The guard to the left of the door, away from the main thoroughfare that passed through the camp, was different than the one who had admitted her, none other than her close friend and second-in-command Whilde. He turned at the creak of the door, then saluted rapidly when he saw who had emerged.

“Captain,” his voice smooth and sonorous, reflecting his relatively young age. He had been involved in the war almost as long as Emeilia had. His village had been among those destroyed when the Enemy marched on Terioth in his attempt to take the city and the King of Vaneah. Whilde's family was killed, so he decided to cast his lot with the Army at seventeen.



Since then, he had proved himself a fearless warrior various times, hateful of Benmesh generally and personally. He dropped the salute.

“So, Captain,” he said, lowering his voice, though it was hardly needed. No one appeared interested in eavesdropping. “Is it true that we’re marching off to war?”

Emeilia blinked, startled. Whilde laughed. “Your face! Ahh, I really got you with that.”

“Where did you hear that?” she demanded fiercely, glancing around at a pair of soldiers walking past, gauging whether they could have heard his question.

He wiped his eyes in exaggerated humor. “A rumor—just one of the dozen I’ve heard today. Trust me, that’s not the wildest of them.” He sobered, “But apparently true nonetheless.”

“I didn’t say that.” Emeilia tried to skirt around the issue.

“Please. I’ve known you long enough to know when you’re trying to lie. So come on, out with the details.” He leaned against the tower, arms folded across his chest and his pike enveloped in his gauntlet. He waited, and she knew from experience his patience was long-lived.

Emeilia stared into the unusually weathered man’s face. He trusted her, something hard won, more challenging than any battle or war, and easily forsaken. Should she risk that trust and stay quiet? Or trust him to keep silent with the intelligence? She resigned to her fate.

“Yes. Soon—I don’t know when. The King has finally decided to march on Lehland.” Somehow saying it made it all the more real to Emeilia. She could picture herself marching alongside her fellow soldiers, approaching the De Vontino bridge, stepping onto its smooth pavement, crossing into the Fiery Fields of golden grain, and climbing the hills and mountains leading to Benmesh’s castle, Castramal.

Whilde whistled, or made as close to the sound as he could letting out the air through his teeth. “War—outright war.” He seemed in awe. Stretching his shoulders, he said, “About time. I’ve grown tired of sitting ’round here, nothing to do. We’ve gotten soft on it for sure. I’m ready to get back to cold battle. It could do us all some good, don’t you think?”



Emeilia frowned. She, for one, rather liked her time at Mizpah. The transition from soldier to mother and back again was tedious at best, but the moments between, when she was either all soldier or all mother, were among her happiest in her career. But always, always, she thought of Edward—as a soldier, recalling days spent with him, as a mother when she was with him on her days off at home. She looked forward to the prospect of war simply for the reason that once the War of the Dueling Kingdoms ceased, she may be rid of the required shifts in her character and adopt one of permanent maternity.

To Whilde, ““Soft?””

“We used to be battle-hardened warriors,” he explained. “Now. . .” He gestured around the camp, at the soldiers struggling to do push-ups or making the same mistake in formation repeatedly, the idlers standing outside of tents, and those eagerly waiting outside the meal hall. “When it comes to it, I don’t think half these soldiers will fight. They’ve been reminded what the quiet life is like. Why would they risk their lives when they can so obviously live them out in peace? You of all of us would know.”

“What do you mean?” she said slowly, almost positive to what he was alluding.

Whilde shrugged. “You more than anyone have reason not to fight, with your family and all. I wouldn’t put it past you or them to to drop out of the Army.”

His words stung like a blade pierced her, but she kept it beneath her exterior. Brushing past Whilde, Emeilia muttered something about having work to do, then went briskly toward the stables. She was not wholly making up excuses for leaving; the King had requested her to prepare herself for the mission with all speed, and she needed to retrieve her horse, Monsras’, saddlebags. However, she did use it as an excuse to get her away from him and someplace quiet to think.

As she walked, her mind inevitably flicked back to the conversation she had just had. How dare Whilde think that she would abandon the cause? Shouldn’t she be the least likely to



have her loyalty questioned for all she had given up for the cause? Yet this was the second time someone she trusted and valued the opinion of had posed doubts. Her mind flooded with memories of her tribunal, a year after she'd given birth to Edward. The King had granted her one year's leave of absence, but before she was permitted to return to active duty, a board of military officials examined her to determine if she was still fit for the campaign, "if her duty to family now equaled or exceeded hers to matters of military or state." Ultimately, all that was decided was that she could serve "for now, barring further inquiries." When she had asked at the end whose idea it was to hold this interrogation, wanting to put a face to her frustration, it was the King himself who stepped forward. He claimed it was for the sake of her well-being, that he did not want her to choose between him and Edward. And now Wilde, her trusted second, thought she would waltz off with half of the "soft" army. Emeilia's hands curled into fists. She had worked hard for the past three years to regain the soldiers' trust, proving herself time and time again that she was capable, able to lead, strong, and entirely dedicated to the cause. Hadn't her years in the Army proved that, if nothing else? Did her brother's sacrifice mean nothing? Her rantings died suddenly. Her older brother, Enitol, served in the Army before her. He died in the Battle of Senna Plains—her family was told nothing more. Even after twenty years, she had a scar she doubted would ever heal or disappear.

Her musings brought her quickly to the stables sequestered on the far side of the gates. Though they could be more promptly mobilized for battle on short notice if they were stabled at the entrance, the horse master worried that the constant noise of people entering the camp, the swinging of the doors and creaking of wagons and carts, would cause the horses too much alarm. He requested that the horses be housed in the most remote corner the camp had to offer, set against the wall, and here they were put. The smell of manure kept all but those on assignment away, affording the only relative quiet in the entire camp. Emeilia didn't mind the scent; it reminded her of her father's ranch, where she had grown up. The sliding barn-style door was



open, pushed as far as possible to entice a breeze to waft away the constant smell. The sun, nearing the horizon, cast long shadows reaching the opposite wall. She padded inside, with just enough noise to alert the horses but not enough to scare them. On both sides of a narrow, hay-strewn aisle, horse stalls ran the length of the long building. Hers, Monsras, was adjacent to the opposite wall. Monsras looked up as she approached, blinked once, then turned back to eating.

“Hey, there,” she said, adopting the babyish voice she used with Edward often when he was younger. “How are you?” He looked at her briefly and again turned to his meal. She reached over to stroke his muzzle and behind his ears. Swinging over the gate, she landed lightly on the other side, the hay crackling almost in protest. He turned to face her now, nuzzling her chest, perhaps in affection or searching for the treat she typically brought him. She placed a hand on his nose, his nostrils quivering and flaring, his breath warming her hand. Except for a patch of white on his hooves and speckled darker spots, he was a beautiful chestnut.

“Hi, Monsras. I’m glad to see you too. Have they been taking good care of you?” She ran her hand down his flank, only to be given a face full of his tail in return. Spitting out hairs, she coughed out, “Yes, yes. I know I was gone too long, but I can’t help it, alright?” He glared at her as though saying, “Oh yeah, what could possibly be more important than me?” He was a very selfish horse that way. His personality bore a resemblance to her father: strong, tough, uncaring at times, and self-centered, but on the inside, wholly concerned and single-minded with her well-being. She wondered what happened to him and Mother after she left. Grabbing a brush hanging nearby, Emeilia began to rub Monsras well, as she usually did before her deployments. It was good for Monsras, as well as for herself, a moment in her crazy, chaotic day or week of preparation, planning, and packing for her to relax, decompress, and think less of retiring. For weeks she had considered it, talked it over with Collan, and was almost ready to tell the King when his summons came. Now that he was depending on her to lead this mission, she could not



afford to fold and walk away. And now more than ever, standing as they were on the brink of warfare. She was trapped in the Army with no way out.

“Quick! In here!” A voice outside the stables hissed. A shadow fell across the entrance. Instinctively, Emeilia ducked behind the stall, crouching in the muck. Multiple footsteps crackled through the hay, raising alarm amongst the horses. After a few moments of grinding along rusted tracks, the door crashed closed with a slam, and the stable half fell into darkness. Making a terrible racket over the hay, footsteps raced to the opposite door. With slightly more delicacy, the door was shut. Emeilia’s heart palpitated with misgivings. Who or what was this person or persons hiding from? Frankly, she had half a mind to barge out and scare them. Just as she was about to stand, a voice echoed in the dark from her side of the stable. It captivated her, holding her in her hiding spot.

“Is it true, then?” The voice sounded like that of a man. Emeilia imagined him a skinny, flimsy sort. “Are we really going to war?” He almost whined this last bit.

“Quiet!” Another man whispered sharply, the same who had spoken first. More sounds of crackling hay. “Yes, yes.” He whispered, nearer to Emeilia. “Didn’t I already tell you that? Can you remember nothing? My source told me moments ago that he’d heard it from the Captain herself, who’d heard it from the King. But that’s not the sort of thing you want to be caught saying, or the Royal Guard will have you in irons faster than you could realize what you did.”

“What are we going to do? I don’t really want to go to war.” The other man did not seem too miffed at being insulted repeatedly. *Must be normal for him*, she thought.

“We,” He stretched the word in dramatic effect, “are going to see Lord Benmesh.”

Emeilia drew a sharp breath, glad the horses provided her with a little auditory cover. It was unnecessary, as the second man began whining immediately, “I don’t want to see *him*. He’ll kill us.”



“Oh, quit being such a baby. That’s just a rumor to scare us off, see? The King wants us to stay here, so he spreads the story that Benmesh is such a despicable and evil person. Fact is, I’ve seen him face to face. Take it from me: he’s courteous, well-dressed, gentlemanly—more than the King here, I tell you. We’ve been on the wrong side this whole war.”

“I still don’t want to do it,” the other said, showing a little spine. The first man said nothing momentarily, almost surprised at his opposition.

“Oh well. Have it your way. I, for one, am leaving this lost cause and making a little profit as well.” It sounded like he turned to leave, his boots scraping as he turned and stepped away.

“Profit?” Emeilia could not decide whether he sounded hurt, betrayed, awestruck, or flabbergasted. Perhaps all at once.

“Yes, yes. Profit, my friend.” He ran back the few steps he had taken. Emeilia could detect slight inflection in his voice, now trying to persuade his friend. “Didn’t I tell you about the reward?”

“Reward?” Definitely awestruck now.

“I guess not. Lord Benmesh promised a reward for our help. He said that if we left the Army and went to him in Lehland—not to fight, mind you—that he would give us more to treasure than we know what to do with. And for each soldier we brought with us, a bonus!”

“When do we leave?” was all the second man said. The pair of voices grew softer.

“Tonight.” The stable door was slid aside more casually and quietly than before, and the stables were again flooded with light. Snapping from the trance-like state, she suddenly came to her senses. Leaping over the gate, she ran, tripping across the room, kicking up hay in her wake. The horses started, but she didn’t care, not now. She flew out the door, expecting to see the two traitors casually crossing the avenue—



Only to find the clearing empty. There were no soldiers, knights, merchants, or any people at all. The sun bordered the horizon, sending up its last rays of light as if in farewell, shining through the gaps in the wall into her eyes. Emeilia ignored it, singularly intent on finding those two traitors. She swept her gaze over the barrels lining the path, the shadows that might accommodate an individual. But still nothing. Emeilia grit her teeth together, resisting the urge to kick a nearby bucket. Her rage won out. The bucket flew across the path. Had they no loyalty but to their own self-interest? The bucket went flying again. Did they really think *Benmesh*—the name grated on her mind—could protect them in the war to come? And on top of that, would deign to reward them?

Yet at the same time, Emeilia begrudgingly saw the tactics in the offer. If Benmesh could convince the Vanihen Army to betray their King, the victory would be his without ever having to meet the Army's full force on the field of battle. It was a cowardly, albeit cunning, move, a last resort. Of course, it was unreasonable to assume that all of the army would prove disloyal, she thought with a flicker of hope. She, at least, would stay, and Whilde—

Something one of the deserters said flashed back to her, "*my source told me moments ago that he'd heard it from the Captain herself*," Surely not. . . And yet who else could it be? Whilde had said he'd heard it from rumors, nothing more, before she told him. The only person the King had implied that He'd told was herself. Emeilia was the only female captain in the Army. No one else could have heard their conversation. The only conclusion left was. . . No, impossible. Whilde would never turn against the King. He had given his whole life for the cause. He hated Benmesh. He wouldn't turn tail now. She frowned as a thought struck her. Or would he? He lost everything because of the King's war, though technically, the fault lay on Benmesh. What is to say he did not want his life back? Or to exact some sort of revenge on the King? But again, Whilde hated Benmesh, not the King. At least, that was the only indication Emeilia had ever gotten from conversation with him. None of it made sense. The only way she saw to find out one





way or another was to talk directly to him. Ask him bluntly whether he served an ulterior motive or Benmesh. Her mind would not rest until she knew—knew if the soldier at her side wouldn't stab her in the back if he was paid to do so. She had work to do, but this was more important.

Leaving Monsras' saddle bags in the stable—she could get them later—she jogged toward the watchtower, where she'd last seen Whilde. The watches were not due to change until sundown when supper would be served and the night guards took over watch; if she hurried, she could catch him either there or on his way to mess. Soldiers streamed past her, those off duty going to get in line for food before it grew too long. A small handful recognized her and stepped out of the way, but the vast majority spoke animatedly with their friends, ignorant or indifferent to the fact that one of their captains was trying to get through. A heavily-built soldier shoved her aside, and she crashed into another soldier. "Hey, watch it!" He growled at her, pushing her away. She regained her footing before colliding with another footman and continued against the current. Soldiers could get very grumpy when hungry. When the crowd thinned, she resumed her brisk pace toward the tower. Two figures stood in its shadow; as it turned out, she caught him in the middle of turnover. As she approached, she made out his voice, "Right now, the King is in conference and ordered not to be disturbed excepting the regular intrusions." He trailed off, pondered for a moment. "I think that's all. Any questions?" The other shook his head. Reaching over to the new guard, he slapped him on the shoulder. "Thanks, Habor. I'll see you around." Then Whilde turned and saw Emeilia. It seemed he faltered for a brief moment. "Captain," he gave her a perfunctory nod. "Care to dine with me?" He held out his arm in gentlemanly fashion.

"Actually, I had some questions for you."

"Can they wait until dinner? I'm absolutely famished."

Emeilia grabbed his forearm. "This cannot wait." He studied her for the span of three heartbeats, the pair unmoving. Then, almost in resignation, he nodded.



“How may I assist you, ma’am?”

“Did you tell anyone—anyone at all—about the coming war?” She wasted no time with pleasantries.

“Well, yeah. It’s what’s on everyone’s mind.” He jumped his gaze around the camp, settling in one place for a second, then on to the next, refusing to look at her. “I mean, of course I didn’t say anything about what you said to me, only what I learned from rumors.”

She pulled his arm, forcing him to look her in the eyes. “Tell me that to my face.”

“I did not tell anyone that we’re going to war,” he said, raising his voice a fraction but enough to attract a few glances in their direction. “Need I spell it out for you?”

“Are you sure no one heard you discussing it with me—absolutely positive?” Emeilia asked, skeptical to say the least. If he said nothing, then how did those soldiers know? And why would they want to incriminate Whilde?

“Yes!” Whilde was angry now. “Yes, yes, a thousand blasted yeses! No one heard it from me. Now can we please go to dinner?”

“Not until I know what I need to know.”

“And what, pray tell, is that? All you’ve asked me are these useless, redundant questions.”

“Someone told the Army that war was coming. I heard it at the stables. They didn’t know I was there and referenced you.”

“Did they say me by name?”

Emeilia flushed. “Well, no, but you knew about the war, and they said they’d heard it from their informant who heard it from the “Captain herself.”

Whilde relaxed, just noticeably. “Well, that answers everything. It wasn’t me. Someone must have been standing nearby and overheard us talking. They didn’t say me by name—you just assumed.” His voice darkened. “Assumed that I would abet in betraying the King’s Army. Is



this what I get? After years of loyalty, I'm assumed of treason? I lost everything because of Benmesh. Everything! I dedicated what remained of my life to the King's cause. Have my years of loyalty meant nothing?" Whilde pulled his arm away from her hold. "Good night, ma'am," his voice frostier than a winter's dawn. He stepped around her and toward the sounds of laughter and mirth at the mess. Leaving Emeilia questioning what she had done and what cost this war might have on her relationships.

She turned back to the tower. Habor, the royal guard standing watch, quickly glanced away. A criticism rose in her throat, which she held a grip on. What good would it do her to pick on another soldier? Glancing around, she wondered what she should do now. The trip was not for another four days, enough time for her to pack, gather supplies, find riders for the pack horses, brief everyone on the trip and the path they would take, and the like. Glancing up at the sky, Emeilia saw that it was getting late. The first stars were visible in the sky above. About time she returned home. Edward and Collan would be inside by now, probably making dinner over the fire. Or a more simple meal of bread and cheese. Her stomach suddenly ached for a nice, warm, moist slice of wheat bread with a bit of cheese melting on top. She wanted to laugh and be there with Collan and Edward, their threesome. She desired to leave behind all the Army business forever and stay just them three. Or, she thought with a smile, maybe more later on. Swiveling to face the main gates, Emeilia began walking as the door behind her creaked.

"My Lord."

"Rise, Habor," came the King's voice. "I have an additional assignment for you: would you locate the Captain Emeilia for me? I have a matter of great importance to discuss with her."

Emeilia snorted a light breath through her nose. Could there be a worse time?

"No need to find me," she said as she entered the circle of light cast by the torch the King brought with him, "I'm already here." She kept all indications of annoyance out of her voice. As



much as she might be exasperated by the nuances of the Army, she would never deliberately show disrespect to the King.

“Ahh. Perfect timing,” the King said, contrary to what Emeilia felt. “If you would step inside?” He moved to stand beside Habor and gestured to the yawning watchtower’s door. Especially now in the dark, it looked more foreboding than earlier in the light. Fighting back a sudden shiver, Emeilia slipped inside, the King following after a few quiet words with Habor. He carefully pulled the door shut. Scanning the room, she found they were not the only two there. On the opposite side of the strategist’s table, a young man rose from a chair, silhouetted by the blazing fire in the fireplace behind him. It was difficult to make out in the inconsistent firelight, but she thought he had short, dirty blond hair, was clean-shaven, and was dressed in a maroon shirt and leather pants. Beside him, more than half hidden in darkness, was a travel bag.

“Captain,” the King said, walking up beside her, “may I introduce Lewtrim, whom I have appointed as my Messenger.” Lewtrim reached across the table and held out his hand. “Good evening, Captain.” She took it, and they shook. His grip was pliable, and she all but crushed his hand. Internally, she smiled when she saw Lewtrim wince visibly and gently pull his hand back, cradling it. A handful of moments of silence followed before Emeilia spoke up.

“My lord, if I may?” The King nodded, and she proceeded. “I heard mere moments ago that there is talk of desertion among the soldiers. Two are planning to leave tonight.” She waited for her words to have the intended effect. Yet neither of them seemed surprised. Lewtrim only nodded gravely, and the King stared off into the fire, not seeming to have heard her. Then he stirred.

“I thank you for telling me, Captain; we shall post a double guard at the gate tonight. Only I am afraid that is of little relevance to you now.”

“How so, sire?”



The King tore his vacant stare from the inferno to meet her gaze. “Necessity has brought your mission to the present. You must leave tonight.”

She was flabbergasted. “You, you said that we wouldn’t leave for four more days.” She sounded pathetic even to her own ears.

The King laid a hand on her shoulder. “I do not do this lightly, Emeilia. As I said, necessity is what drives us.” Gesturing with his other hand to the Messenger, he continued, “Lewtrim has just told me that there are spies from Benmesh in the camp, perhaps the same ‘deserters’ that you have brought to my attention. You must leave before word of your departure spreads, or worse, the nature of your mission. That is why you must leave tonight.”

Emeilia nodded, numb inside. She was expecting an evening with her family, almost a whole week of days with them. She could do her work feverishly on the last day if only to spend more time with Edward. And now that expectation was shattered, like so many others she had held. She felt nothing at all. She gave up hope immediately, but not easily.

The King was still speaking. “All the supplies and men are gathered, waiting only for the escorted, and their commander.” He nodded to each of them in turn. “What do you lack?”

“I have everything.” Lewtrim held up his backpack and a satchel. His arms strained with the combined weight. The King nodded, apparently satisfied. Facing Emelia, he asked, “And you, Captain?”

“Nothing.” She hefted the rucksack she had gathered when she got the summons. At the time, it was a precaution; she never actually thought she would need it. Her own voice was weak, unenthusiastic, bored even. Better than full of emotion, resignation, or resentment.

The King smiled warmly. “I must deny your readiness; there is still one thing you have not done.” Her mind snapped into her combat focus. She mentally flipped through the items she had in her bag. All was accounted for. Her water skin was full and around her neck. Monsras



needed to be saddled; however, that would take mere seconds if done in a rush. Aside from that, she came up blank.

“I have not yet saddled my horse,” she said slowly, as one might to a teacher, unsure of the answer.

“That, too, has been prepared. What is left is something only you can do.” The King opened the door and beckoned her to go through. More than a little confused, Emeilia retraced her steps to where she argued with Whilde, the King, and Lewtrim following strangely distant. The camp was entirely empty before the watchtower leading to the gate. From the sounds of nightly revelry, dinner was still taking place. She turned her head to look at the King, who motioned her to face forward again. A figure had appeared in that short span, grotesque and looming out of the shadows. They approached the light radiating from the torch beside the door to Mizpah, with each second passing becoming clearer. She strained her eyes, trying to make out whether they were friend or foe. Her heart stopped. There was Collan carrying Edward, the latter dressed for bed and yawning.

The King walked up behind her. “I will leave you to say farewell,” he whispered, handing her a torch.

Edward looked unimaginably tired, his eyes flickering shut while he clutched Collan’s neck. When he saw Emeilia, he immediately perked up, eyes wide and alert, and cried, “Mommy!” He let go of Collan’s neck and reached out with both hands for her. She let out a laugh covering a sob as tears threatened to fall. Wiping them away, she crossed the distance that separated them and one-armed hugged Edward, keeping the torch in the other hand away from him. He smelled of honey, his favorite after-dinner treat. When they broke apart, Collan put him down and took the torch from her. His eyes glistened with tears. With both hands, Emeilia reached down and picked up Edward, propping him on her arm with her hand resting on her hip. He hugged her again, squeezing her neck tightly.



“Why did you leave, Mummy?” Edward asked, tracing a strand of her wavy ginger hair. Emeilia glanced at Collan, asking with her eyes what seemed the constant question of her life: *what do I tell him?* Collan shrugged very unhelpfully, then mouthed, *the truth*. Having lost interest in the hair, Edward shifted his gaze to Emeilia, staring expectantly. Emeilia wondered if her glare was as disturbing. When Edward was born, everyone said that he had Emeilia’s brilliant blue eyes. She had thanked them but expected that they would fade as he grew older. So far, they had not in the slightest.

“I—“she flailed for the right word, “uhh, had work to do.”

“More important than playing?” He was dead serious. She looked furtively over her shoulder at the King, who was in deep conversation with the Messenger.

“More important than playing,” she affirmed. Should she tell Edward that she would be gone for months, traveling through the most dangerous place in Teluth with a small handful of knights and a physically weak speaker who would proclaim a message likely incite Benmesh and the whole population of Lehland against them?

“Are you leaving for a long time again?” Edward left her no room to bend the truth. She nodded. “I don’t like it when you leave.” He suddenly began to cry.

Emeilia’s heart broke. She pulled him closer, trying to think of something she could say to make it all better, to justify her absence. But Edward would be without his mother at four years old—nothing could make that better. Like lightning, her ire flashed against the King. What kind of good king would permit and even require his soldiers and their families to be kept apart? Then her anger faded, leaving behind the knowledge that it was not a matter of a king’s kindness or tyranny but that which was necessary for the good of the kingdom and the families in its domain.

“Look at me, Eddy,” she said, lifting his buried face to look at her. A twin set of tears ran down his face. With her thumb, she wiped the marks away. “Guess what?” she asked.



He sniffed his running nose. “What?”

“This is the last time I’ll leave.” Collan bent his head slightly, giving her a questioning stare. She gave a minute nod. To Edward, “After this—once I return from this trip—I’ll never leave again, and we can play every day. It’ll be just me, you, and Daddy.” She reached out to take Collan’s hand. “Just us.” She jostled Edward, bouncing him on her hip. “Does that sound nice?” He nodded. “Sounds like a plan, then.” Tiny tendrils of excitement already tugged at her at the prospect. She never thought she would be excited to retire, always thought death or old age were the only things to keep her from serving in the army. But here it was; the end was in sight.

Addressing both of them, “Now just hang on until I get back, alright?” Collan gently bobbed his head. Emeilia reached over and embraced him. When they separated, Collan reached into a bag at his side and handed Edward two of his toys, and she recognized them as two of the three Emeilia’s father gave him for his fourth birthday. She and Collan watched Edward play with the toys, a white horse and a mountain lion, neither wanting to leave the other but knowing it was inevitable. But not yet.

“Whatcha got there?” She asked, recalling the toys but unable to recollect their names. She felt a twinge of regret at that.

He waved the horse. “She’s Snow,” he said matter-of-factly. “And he’s,” he frowned at the lion figurine. “I haven’t named him yet.”

“Well, that’s okay.” Emeilia could have spent a lifetime with the two of them, forever talking and playing in the early night at Mizpah, with the cool night air rustling the leaves. She would have if it were not for the King, waiting patiently behind her. She glanced back. There he was, hands folded behind his back, politely not staring but obviously waiting for them. It was only by His graciousness that she was allowed even these moments. Only now, it was time to depart. A chill settled over Emeilia, papable enough for Edward to feel. He shivered. Slowly, she





lowered Edward to the ground, him reluctantly unwrapping his arms from around her neck. She crouched to his level. Pointing to the lion, she asked, “Can he run really fast?” He gave a shrug.

“Is he brave?” He thought about it for a moment, sticking his tongue out in concentration, just a small bit of pink between his pale lips. Reaching a conclusion, he said, “Yes.”

“Is he trying to *eat* the horse?” As she said, “eat,” she tickled him. His laughter rang out, clear as a bell, bringing a smile to both Collan’s and Emeilia’s faces and driving back the dark and cold. Then his laugh died out, and the chill returned with force. This was no happy celebration or joyous occasion but a somber send-off.

She retrieved the lion figure where Edward had dropped it and, as she handed it to him, said, “I expect him to have a name by the time I get back, okay?” He took it gingerly, then ran to hide behind Collan’s legs. She slowly unbent, maternal guilt wrenching her. This was her fault. Who knew what kind of harm her long months of absence may cause to Edward’s emotional development? She belatedly reflected on the answer she gave the tribunal when they asked if her family would introduce thoughts of conflict and disloyalty to the Kingdom. She had told them then that nothing in Teluth could change her mind from serving the King. Except, as she found out later (and even knew when she said it), that was not entirely truthful.

Collan reached out to her, and she gladly fell into him. She leaned on him, and he held her. He whispered in her ear, “Come back soon and safe.” She whispered back, “I always do.” He gave her a quick kiss, and they simultaneously turned away to their mutual responsibilities, he to Edward and she to the King.

Behind her, a crowd had silently gathered: horses, knights in armor and long cloaks, supplies, and the King and Messenger. A handful of torches lit the gathering, concealing a large part of the group. Still, Emeilia counted a mere six or seven knights—trivial protection. All of them were at work, either adjusting their stirrups or saddlebags or loading more provisions. No one seemed to notice or care for her heartfelt farewell, which is how she wanted it. She made her



way over to Monsras, who was already saddled. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the King break away from the knot He was speaking with and make his way to intercept. She lengthened her strides and reached Monsras before him. Immediately getting to work, she refused to meet his gaze.

“Captain, I hope you show me no resentment.”

“You sent for them?” She pulled the saddle down off Monsras’ shoulders.

“I did, for I knew this trip may last many months. One must never go long without the proper farewells with family.”

She whirled on him. “Next time,” she said, her voice low and bordering threat, “tell me before, not after.” She turned back to her horse and busied herself stowing the items from her rucksack in her saddlebags.

The King did not flinch. “There will be no next time; this is your last mission.” Never in twenty years had she ever heard the King tease, but as a precaution, Emeilia would not show her incredulity. “When you return, I will grant you retirement with a comfortable monthly pension. Commander Whilde will lead the war effort as my new captain, so long as you approve of him.”

She thought of her recent accusation of him, her hands slowing as she forgot what she was doing. Did she trust Whilde to lead the Vanihen Army to victory? Was he capable? After what she did, she knew he thought she did not trust him. But, she reflected, past experience triumphs over future reservations.

“I do.” That was all she said, all she knew to say. After almost two decades of military life, it was hard enough to imagine that there was any other life to live. But that she would leave the military for civilian life in a few short months? Not possible. She pushed the empty rucksack on top of her bag and belted it closed.

“At your order, Captain.” He reached over and held the reins as she swung fluidly onto Monsras. One last time, she reviewed her possessions on her. Looking behind, she ensured the



food and water provisions were securely fastened to Monsras. Getting a nod from each of the other knights—there were indeed only eight of them—she nodded in turn to the King. “We ride.”

“Mummy!” Edward ran toward her, Collan walking helplessly behind. He approached her, staring with his head almost bent all the way back to see her on top of the horse. “Here.” He held out the small toy mountain lion. “He’s brave, like you.” She did not bother to hold back the tears, relying on the relative darkness to obscure them from the nearby knights. The King picked up the toy from Edward’s outstretched hand and handed it to Emeilia. She mouthed ‘thank you’ as Collan caught up and took Edward’s other hand. Edward waved as the two walked away. The King followed them with His eyes.

“You have a beautiful son, Emeilia, and a caring husband; never neglect them.” He patted her leg before going off toward Lewtrim, who was struggling to get on his horse in his long travel cloak. She watched blankly as the King embraced him, then helped him as He had helped her. The King was right: Edward was beautiful and Collan caring. The King lifted up a pouch and handed it to Lewtrim. They both said something in low voices and Lewtrim, with the most delicate movements, carefully took the blue velvet pouch and tucked it in one of his saddlebags. Lewtrim turned to her and gave her a nod.

Holding the reins in one hand, the other holding the lion, she pressed her heels into Monsras’ sides, impelling him forward through the lane the others had formed. Lewtrim fell in step behind her, the rest of the knights following one by one. Their party of ten stepped up to the gates, which were already agape. She twisted in her saddle, scanning the nine people, the nine lives, she now held in her care. It was her responsibility that they return alive. Already she could feel the doubts rising, the what-ifs threatening to overwhelm and incapacitate her. Then she deliberately stroked the soft curves of the wood mountain lion and repeated her son’s words to



herself. “He’s brave, like you.” She squeezed it tightly. For him, for Edward, for Collan, for the King, for the last mission, she would be brave.



—Author's Note—

*War was coming, war against Benmesh, against his tyranny in Lehland, against all that was evil in Teluth. Finally, the King saw fit to bring his strength to bear against Benmesh.*

The entire story of Vaneah is heavily based upon the Words of Scripture, both in themes and symbolism. This line is perhaps a bit of the two. Emeilia has been with the Army for literally decades and only now when she plans on getting out will the war actually begin. But after so long a time of relaxation, she does doubt the ability of the Army to defeat Benmesh. As shown with her conversation with Wihilde and her thoughts afterward:

*“When it comes to it, I don't think half these soldiers will fight.”*

and

*Of course, it was unreasonable to assume that all of the army would prove disloyal, [Emeilia] thought with a flicker of hope.*

It reminds me of the Parable of the Sower that Jesus shared in Matt. 13:5-6 & vv. 20-21, “Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root.” And “The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.”

There are soldiers in the Vanihen Army who perhaps joined recently, eager to participate in a cause they believed in and wanting to end the war. But they soon find the cruel reality of warfare, the tedious nature, long marches, absence from family, all the while their lives are on



the line. When these troubles invade their thoughts, as Whilde put it, “I don’t think half these soldiers will fight.” They will turn away, scorched (as it were) by their worldly cares.

There is a second type of soldier who might defect, who also has a character in one of Jesus’ parables. In fact, it is the very same Parable of the Sower. The two traitors that Emeilia tried to apprehend at the stables are best described in Matt. 13:7 & v. 22,

“Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants.”

“The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful.”

The bit about wealth was *not* a specific reference. I created and wrote the characters without thought to this Parable. These two soldiers may have been loyal for years, maybe even as long as Emeilia (though I doubt that), but all the while they served, thorns crept up around their hearts. All the hard things they did for the Army they did believing that they would get some reward out of it, recognition, wealth, or the like. When their egotism was unfulfilled, they turned to Benmesh, who was happy to fill their needs if only to, in turn, attain his own dark desires. Only the wealth they seek after is deceitful, as the verse says. Their work hereafter will always and irrevocably prove fruitless. They will never be satisfied with money, or fame, for the only thing that can give one a sense of fulfillment is self-actualization, or the realizing of one’s inner goals. Without those, they are lost.

In all of Emeilia’s concerns and wonderings she never once questions the King (who is in desperate need of a name). She knows that he is true and will not change, and grew to this belief through years of learning his character. She may be angry with him at times (*She whirled on him. “Next time,” she said, her voice low and bordering threat, “tell me before, not after.”*) but she is still his subject (*she would never deliberately show disrespect to the King*). Emeilia shows him great faith in his timing and plan, as she demonstrated in the first and second chapters, a trait I



derived from the Christian life. This chapter built itself in ways I never would have expected, and ways I never could have construed on my own. I pray the rest of the book will prove successful likewise.

Gloria illi semper,

Caleb Kelly