Sacred Wars Part III: Heroes of Austean

by Lugialvr1994

Summary

Over a quarter-century after the end of the Second Rebellion, a young woman who had known neither family nor friendship is thrust into a new war. As a foreign aggressor has sets their sights on Terranor, her myriad peoples must stand together against their new enemy. If they fail to do so, the world of Austean could be plunged into a new age of tyranny.

Warning: This story contains mentions, but not depictions, of rape and considered suicide. See the third paragraph of the opening notes for more details.

Notes

Welcome to the final chapter of my Sacred Wars Saga. My D&D version 3.5 inspired post-medieval fantasy war series is coming to a close as a trilogy. This story is a sequel to Sacred Wars Parts I and II first and foremost. However, it is also a sequel to Convergence, my crossover story, which Sacred Wars Part II was also a prequel to. I would strongly suggest having read the first two Sacred Wars stories before reading this trilogy capper. However, while reading Convergence first should be considered optional, there are a number of references to it peppered throughout this story. Also, a number of this story’s characters first appeared in that story, but not its main characters. I should also note here that I am...
aware of this story being quite a whopper in terms of length. It is eleven chapters longer than its closest competitor among my works in terms of chapter number. One other thing worth noting is that I began work on this story in Summer 2019. I abandoned it in the Fall due to some personal things that came up unexpectedly. However, I returned to the story in February 2020 and finally finished the rough draft.

In terms of content, this story is somewhat of a fantasy version of World War I. There is some technology present that is ahead of the real historical period, inducing radios and semi-automatic rifles. However, effective armor and melee weapons also appear like they did in Sacred Wars Part II and Convergence. This story’s inspiration from Dungeons and Dragons Version 3.5 may be even more obvious to anyone reading familiar with the system than the other stories in this series thanks to the heavy involvement of dragons and dragon-descended characters in this final installment. This story is a war story like the two stories before it. However, it tends to be shown from the perspective of lower-ranking soldiers than the main characters of Parts I and II. Still, this story pays much more attention to the concept of military rank than Fall of Austean did, probably even more than Tales of Austean did as well.

Regarding the warning that I put below this story’s summary, this work does contain references to rape and considered suicide, not regarding the same character. There are no in-depth depictions of rape in this story and no characters who appear “onscreen” in this story are sexually assaulted in any way. I did not include the rape/non-con warning for this story because the Archive’s Terms of Service said that references alone did not warrant the warning. The references I mentioned above first appear over twenty-five chapters into the story and are not repeated too often afterwards. I hope that those references do not get in the way of readers’ enjoyment of this story.

Also, seeing as though my last story was dedicated to my Father’s mother, my Nana, this story is being officially dedicated to my own mother. She always has believed in me, even when I stubbornly refuse to believe in myself.

With all of the above said, this story will be posted twice a week Wednesdays and Saturdays until it is fully posted. I also apologize for any tabbing issues that will appear in this story in advance. It is already finished and has been edited. I hope that you all enjoy the finale of the Sacred Wars Saga.
The New Cellmate

Late Winter 1916 AC: (Austeanean Calendar) A high security cell located in the underground level of the main prison of the Terranoran capital city Agharta.

Lily was sitting on her bed as she often did. The young blonde had the slightly depressed cheekbones and slightly pointed ears that would mark her as a half light-elf to someone observant. Her hair flowed down slightly past her shoulders. She did her best to keep it as neat as she always had.

As she often had to, Lily reached a hand up and slightly adjusted the locked metal collar around her neck. The suppressor was the reason she was allowed to sit in her cell without wearing any restraints, or a gag. However, it was still uncomfortable, cold and chafed her skin. Lily wore a pair of black pants and brown boots and a simple white shirt. The basic prison uniform was designed to make it hard for prisoners to conceal any contraband. It was the standard uniform for all of the prisoners, including those in high security, where Lily sat. Printed in black on the back of Lily’s shirt was the code, AG 19060. It was her prisoner number.

Lily had been incarcerated for the last half year. The only reason she had been detained in the high security wing after her sentencing was because of the arcane energy that had flowed through her veins since her birth. Of course, she had no idea why she had been born a sorceress. Maybe if she had ever met her parents, she would have a better idea?

Lily was a young woman alone in the world. She had no known family. The street gang she had run with in the poorest part of the continental capital had been busted at the same time that she had been arrested. Lily had been valued by her criminal associates for her unique talents. However, most of them had stayed away from her when she was not actively needed. Despite her beauty and loneliness, she wondered if they had feared her. Of course, none of that mattered now. She had a plan for moving her life forward once she was out of prison. However, there was still another year and a half to wait.

As Lily was looking up at the ceiling, there being no windows in her cell, she heard some footsteps approaching her cell. She looked out of the bars and saw a pair of guards wearing dark blue and white uniforms. The two guards were escorting a female prisoner wearing the same style of uniform as Lily. This woman was wearing a suppressor collar herself. Her wrists were clearly cuffed behind her back. Lily was a bit surprised to see that the prisoner’s skin was covered with red scales. Her limbs looked to be quite muscular. Her head was wedge-shaped and bore two lizard-like eyes and a mouth filled with sharp teeth. Lily could catch a glimpse of a short tail that with a base just above the woman’s hips.

When the trio reached Lily’s cell door, she stood up and folded her arms. One of the two guards got to work removing the manacles from their prisoner’s wrists. The other guard looked over at Lily and told her, as he walked up to the cell door, “Prisoner 19060, your new cellmate is here.”

Lily looked over to the empty second bed of her cell, which sat across from her own. She then thought, as the guard who had addressed her walked over to unlock her cell door, “They did not warn me about this? I guess there is nothing I can do about it? As for her… she looks like a half-dragoness? I better not piss her off. She could likely beat me to a pulp if she wanted to.”

The guard who had addressed Lily opened the cell door. After her manacles were removed, the half-dragon woman walked into the cell saying nothing. She did not put up any resistance to the guards, or even give them any nasty looks. Lily noticed that she was wearing thick black leather.
gloves that were secured to her forearms with built-in locked leather cuffs. Lily admitted to herself that it was a smart way of preventing the prisoner from using her claws without making her lose the use of her hands completely.

The guard closed the cell door. As he did so, he said, “Play nice, 19060 and 20140. You two will be enjoying each other’s company for the time being.” After that, the two guards left without further comment.

Prisoner 20140 sat down on the bed across from Lily’s. Lily then cautiously sat down on her bed. The young sorceress thought, as the two women eyed each other, “She is much stronger than me. That means that I better be careful. I will have to try to get on her good side. I better find out why she is in prison. That will help me gauge my chances of surviving this arrangement.”

As her new cellmate surveyed the cell, Lily took a deep breath and asked the half-dragoness, “So, what are you in for?”

Prisoner 20140 looked over at Lily, it was hard to tell what sort of expression was on her face. However, she answered, sounding surprisingly calmly, “I assaulted a bunch of dwarves.” She then sighed and chuckled, “I was doing a damn good job of it before the police arrived.”

Lily wondered if her new cellmate was half-light elf and half-dragon. She cautiously asked, “Do you not like dwarves?”

Lily sensed slight embarrassment in her fellow prisoner, who then shook her head and continued, “No, not categorically. They were harassing a few light-elf families in a series of tenements and I decided that someone had to do something about it. Unfortunately for me, the cops showed up as I was fighting them and I had to surrender.”

Lily raised an eyebrow and asked, “So, you were arrested for trying to help some people?”

20140 replied, “Pretty much. I’m a private mercenary contractor by trade. However, these elves did not have much money. Honestly, they did not even ask for my help, I just decided somebody had to do something.”

Lily cynically mentioned, “But, you are the one in prison now.”

20140 thought for a moment and explained, “I asked my public defender to file an appeal on my behalf. I hope that I can do some job for the locals and get out of here quickly. I like to think that someone in a high place will see that I can be of greater use outside of prison then inside.”

Lily replied, “Well, at least you have a plan to get out of here. I still have a year and a half to serve and no reason to file an appeal…”

20140 interjected, “You are wearing a suppressor collar? Are you a spellcaster of some kind? Maybe you could offer your services in that field in exchange for a reduced sentence?”

Lily was surprised at how pleasant and upbeat her new cellmate was. To be fair, it was much better to have a self-righteous cellmate than some hardened criminal. She then admitted, “I was planning on applying for the Agharta Academy of Magic when I get released. I honestly don’t know what other job I could be qualified for? As far as I know, I don’t think they have enough of an arcanist shortage that they would let me out of prison earlier for that reason.”

20140 simply nodded and said, “It was just an idea.” She then put a hand to her face and apologetically admitted, “I also completely forgot to ask you your name.”
Lily replied, “Lily, just Lily. I have no family. So, I have no last name.”

The half-dragoness sighed and said, “I don’t have a family either. Still, my name is Haley. Hales to my friends. I actually came to this continent from Scralville on the north coast of Dalugon a few months ago. It was not long after arriving in Agharta that I found myself in legal trouble. I just got transferred to this prison yesterday. By the way, Lily, what are you in for?”

Lily awkwardly admitted, “I ran with what many would call a bad crowd after I left my orphanage. The street gang I was in got busted late last year. Some woman from the United Church Militia carrying a massive hammer led some local police and volunteers to raid our hideout. I was among the survivors who were captured and taken to trial. I was sentenced to two years in prison. I only got sent to high security because of my magical talents.”

Haley replied, “I only got put down here because of my being half-flame dragon and half-human. I think some Terranorans call my ancestors greater mountain fire breathers. It seems like we are both orphans. However, I decided to train myself and use my skills to make a mostly legitimate living helping people once I was too old to stay at the orphanage any longer.”

Lily could not help but ask Haley, “Sorry to be so blunt, but it seems like you aren’t bitter about being alone in the world? I never had much chance to think about helping others when I was on the streets. No prospective parents would adopt me because they did not have the resources to raise a child with my powers. The other kids at the orphanage avoided me and even my fellow gang members did the same.”

Haley sighed and replied, “The folks at the Scralville orphanage raised me right. They taught me and the others the difference between right and wrong. Dragons are respected in most of Dalugon, so the other orphans thought that I was cool and wanted to hang out with me. Also, I know that my mother loved me, when I was left at the orphanage as a baby she left a note saying as much. She never did specify why she could not raise me herself. However, she gave me my name and said that I would have a better chance at life and be safer without her.”

Lily folded her arms and sighed deeply. She told Haley, “I guess that you were lucky then….”

Haley mentioned, “In all seriousness, I am surprised that you were not approached more often. You are seriously beautiful. I could see someone like you having to beat the men off of her with a stick, so to speak.”

Lily cocked her head and could not help but laugh. She shook her head and told Haley, “That’s not how it worked out. To be fair, I would not mind being in a position to have to beat off other gorgeous women. Men are not my thing.”

Haley just nodded and replied, “Sorry for the assumption. As for me, I kind of swing both ways. You might be surprised how many people are willing to ignore my lizard face and focus on my physique.”

Lily got the hint. She felt a strong degree of jealousy towards her new cellmate. At the same time, she could not help but be impressed. Haley was an orphan with no family like her. However, she was possibly the most principled person Lily had ever conversed with. Lily told Haley, “I can imagine. Regardless, don’t worry about assuming I was straight. Most people are anyway.”

Haley just nodded and replied, “Thank you. Anyway, I do hope to be released within the next couple of months. I was sentenced for a year, but I would rather not serve all of that time when I can make myself useful outside of this place…. Look, Lily, while I am here I will make you a deal. You will show me the ‘ropes’ of being in prison, who not to piss off and all of that. In exchange, if
anybody messes with you, I will have your back for sure.”

Lily admitted, “Honestly, there are not many other prisoners here in the women’s high security section right now. Our meals get delivered to our cells and we get some occasional exercise. One annoying thing is that anytime we get moved from this cell, we have to have our arms restrained. Honestly, I wish I was in the regular prison upstairs most days. It gets awfully lonely down here.”

Haley sighed a bit and told Lily, “In that case, while I am here, I will do my best to keep you company. You have clearly had a hard life, Lily. I will see what I can do to help you get on a better path while we are living together.”

Lily knew that her new cellmate pitied her. She considered saying something about not needing Haley’s pity. However, she decided against it. It was nice to have someone else in the world give a damn about her. Lily knew that Haley would be released from prison before her for sure. However, she would do her best to be a good cellmate while the two were together. Besides, Haley was the only real company she was going to have for quite a while.

Lily simply replied, “I was getting pretty tired of being along in here, to be honest. Thank you… I guess.”

Haley seemed to smile a toothy smile back at Lily. She then told her, “We can make this work. I understand why you are as cynical as you are, nobody has really stood up for you before, or tried to be your friend. Maybe what you need is for someone to believe in you?”

Lily just nodded. In some ways, she was still confused about how nice Haley was. Was the half-dragoness trying to overcompensate for her monstrous appearance? Maybe it was just her personality? Maybe she had just made a concerted effort from a young age to be a good person. Regardless, Lily was still just relieved that her new cellmate was not going to try to use her as a punching bag.
Two weeks passed from the day when Lily had met Haley. In the time since she had been introduced to the half-dragoness, Lily had heard multiple stories of Haley’s past adventures. The young woman had mostly helped her hometown and other settlements in the vicinity deal with bandits and monstrous creatures. Haley had come to Terranor in search of new work and found herself in Agharta, her first real big city experience.

Of course, visiting Agharta had not worked out well for Haley. Her appeal did not seem to have made any headway in the last two weeks. Secretly, Lily was hoping that Haley’s appeal would not go through. She enjoyed having the company of a cellmate who she knew had no intention of abusing her. Having someone to talk with had proved to be nicer than Lily had expected. Having spent most of her life alone, Lily was slowly starting to discover what it was like to be in the company of another person on a routine basis.

With her arcane powers suppressed, Lily knew that she was not in the shape to fight anyone. She was not muscular, like Haley was and she did not have much experience fighting hand to hand. When she had fought in her street gang, Lily had caused some injuries with her magic. However, she had never killed anyone. That had mainly been due to her wanting to avoid any murder charges if she was ever arrested. Now that she was in prison, she was glad that she had stuck with that strategy.

One morning, Lily and Haley were sitting in their cell on their beds as they often did. The pair had just finished the breakfast that the guards had delivered them. Prison food was not great, but Lily still appreciated having three guaranteed meals a day. That was a luxury she had not had since her orphanage days. The food there had not been great either, to be fair.

Suddenly, Lily heard a series of footsteps coming towards their cell. She and Haley looked out through the bars and saw a trio of guards coming their way. There were no other prisoners with them. Lily wondered what was going on. She had noticed that the guards had often seemed on edge the last month or so. However, prisoners in the high security section were normally not entitled to newspapers, or to listen to the radio. Therefore, she was not sure what was going on.

Haley stood up, as did Lily. The guard in the rear walked to the cell door and took out some keys. The other two guards each drew a pair of wrist restraints. Lily recognized the pair of standard handcuffs for her and a pair of heavier manacles for Haley.

As the door to their cell was opened, Lily wondered what was going on. She knew that today was not a scheduled exercise day. Why were the guards coming to retrieve both of them?

The lead guard’s comrades walked in to the cell as he ordered the two prisoners, “Up against the wall, hands behind your backs. Someone wants to meet with the two of you.”

Lily knew better than to resist as she wondered who in the world could possibly want to meet with both her and Haley at the same time. She and Haley did as they as they were ordered. It was not long until Lily felt the metal handcuffs closing around her wrists. She noticed Haley’s manacles being locked on to her wrists over her leather gloves.

Once the two prisoners were cuffed, they were marched out of their cell by the trio of guards. Lily soon noticed, as she and Haley were escorted down a hallway, that they were now in a part of the prison basement that she had not been in before.
Soon, the small procession reached an elevator door. One of the guards used a key to unlock the
door. Clearly, the guards did not want any prisoners out of their cells to be able access to the
elevator. Lily and Haley were marched inside the elevator. Neither of the two bound young women
put up any resistance. Still, the two cellmates had no idea of where they were being taken. The lead
guard pressed one of the elevator buttons and the lift began to rumble upwards. Lily was tempted to
ask one of the guards where they were going. However, she was too nervous to open her mouth.

The elevator reached what was possibly the top floor of the prison. Lily and Haley were marched
out into another hallway. This hallway had a series of doors on each side. The doors were not
reinforced and many of them had glass windows. It did not take long for Lily to realize that this
was the prison’s administrative floor.

Lily and Haley were escorted to a door that was marked “Warden’s Office.” Oddly enough there
were two people flanking the door. Each of them was wearing an armored dark blue uniform with
white stripes. They were each equipped with a carbine rifle and a longsword. Lily realized that
these were not normal prison guards, these had to be soldiers. What were they doing here?

One of the two soldiers opened the door. She told the three prison guards, “You are dismissed. The
two prisoners are to enter. Do not unlock their restraints, but give us the keys.”

The lead prison guard saluted the soldiers and told them, “We will leave these two to you in that
case.” He then handed one of the soldiers the keys to Lily and Haley’s cuffs.

A third soldier appeared in the doorway. She was a lovely young human woman with light skin
and flowing raven hair. Her lightly armored uniform had Sergeant’s stripes on her shoulder plates.
She was heavily armed, two semi-automatic pistols and two short swords were holstered and
sheathed at her belt. There was a carbine rifle strapped to her back. The new arrival said to Lily and
Haley, seeming serious but not overly harsh, “Come on in you two. We have been waiting for you.”
She then took the keys to Lily and Haley’s restraints from one of the soldiers and walked back into
the office.

Haley stepped into the sizable office first, Lily soon followed her. The two women walked into the
center of a large room with a window looking out at the prison courtyard at the other end. Lily
soon realized that the prison warden was not here. She was pretty sure that he was a dwarven man.
Sitting at the warden’s desk was a dark-skinned human man wearing a well-armored Terranoran
Army officer’s uniform. Standing next to the desk was another dark-skinned soldier. This one was
a slightly-younger woman with slightly curled black hair that flowed down just past her shoulders.
She was wearing a lightly-armored Lieutenant’s uniform. Neither of these two soldiers were
carrying their weapons. The Sergeant closed the door behind her. Now, Lily and Haley were in the
warden’s office with the three soldiers. Lily still had no idea what the Terranoran Army could
possibly want with her and Haley. This mysterious meeting had come with no warning for the two
prisoners.

The officer sitting behind the desk stood up and looked the two prisoners over. He then began,
“Prisoner AG 19060 and prisoner AG 20140, my name is Captain Emmet Benson.” Emmet then
gesture over to the Lieutenant standing next to him and continued, “This is my second in
command, Lieutenant Ruby Benson. I will not waste any more time with pleasantries, we are have
commandeered this warden’s office briefly to interview some of the prisoners being held here. We
have looked over the files on the two of you and come to the conclusion that you two may be of
use to us.”

Haley asked Captain Benson, “Sir, what use would you have for us? I have actually put in an
appeal asking for me to be released in exchange for my taking on some sort of mission.”
Ruby explained, “This is not about that. The offer we have come to give the two of you would entail you being released from prison early if you accepted. However, you are not being asked to perform any single task for us.”

Emmet nodded and continued, “It seems as though the two of you do not know that Terranor is at war and has been for roughly the last month. The Ruvian region to the south is rapidly being overrun and much of the Western Plains have also fallen under hostile control. What we are here to offer you is a chance to have the remainder of your prison sentences negated. However, in exchange, you two would be enlisted in the Terranoran Army as Privates. You would be assigned to whatever unit would take you and serve for the duration of the war.”

The Sergeant standing at the door behind Lily and Haley mentioned to the two prisoners, “If you two tried to escape after being enlisted, you would be treated as deserters and would likely be court martialed and executed.”

Ruby gave the Sergeant a bit of a look and said, “What Sergeant Falchum says is true. However, after looking at your files, we still believe that you two have the right skill sets to be good soldiers. 19060 is a sorceress and 20140 is an experienced mercenary trained in the use of several weapons.”

Captain Benson finished, “If either or both of you accept, then you will be released from this facility effective immediately. You will be allowed to gather any of your belongings being kept here. After that, you will be taken to a nearby military base where you will be outfitted and given some basic training. From there, you will be given your unit assignment and deployed to the front lines. What say the two of you?”

Lily was just surprised that there was a war on. It seemed like whoever the enemy was, they were on the offensive and pushing back the Terranoran forces on two fronts. Lily also quickly realized that the Terranoran military had to be desperate to be recruiting skilled prisoners to bolster its ranks. She wondered how many other criminals were being given the same offer that she and Haley were.

As Lily was pondering how to respond to Captain Benson’s question, Haley took a step forward without hesitation and replied, “I will accept your offer, sir.”

Lily’s mind raced as Emmet and Ruby smiled at Haley. She thought, “If Haley goes off to war, then I will be alone again. Even if this mystery invasion is stopped, I will be stuck alone in my cell for over a year from now. …I wonder if a good military service record would increase my chances of getting into the Agharta Academy of Magic? Maybe it would cancel out my criminal past and make me a good candidate. …Either way, Haley is the only person who has consistently shown me kindness recently. If there is anyone I want to be standing by in a fight, it would have to be her….”

Lily took a deep breath and then stepped forward next to Haley. She said, “I will also accept your offer, sir.”

Haley seemed a bit surprised by Lily’s acceptance of the offer. However, she said nothing in response.

Captain Benson smiled and then ordered, “Sergeant Falchum, unlock their cuffs and take these two down to the processing office on the first floor. Secure their release and enlistment. After that, take them to our base and get them outfitted and given a temporary barracks assignment.”

Ruby told the Sergeant, “I think that you should be able to take care of these two. We still have another couple of possible recruits to meet with, so we will be here for the time being.”
Sergeant Falchum began unlocking Haley’s manacles and told her, “Seems like the two of you made the right decision. Now, once your release is secure, your suppressors will come off, as well as these claw gloves.”

Haley nodded as she stretched her arms after she was un-cuffed. The Sergeant then unlocked Lily’s handcuffs. Lily and Haley were both told to follow the raven-haired woman out of the office, which they did.

As the trio made their way to the elevator, Sergeant Falchum said, “Like I said before, trying to escape is not something I would advise.”

As they entered the elevator, Haley replied, “Not what I was planning, ma’am.”

Lily added, “You have made your point clear, Sergeant.”

Sergeant Falchum nodded and admitted, “20140, your file actually said that you were arrested for what you claimed was helping stop the harassment and persecution of some citizens.”

Haley replied, “If its ok with you, especially since I will no longer be a prisoner soon, could you please call me Haley, or even Private? I would rather not be identified by a number.”

Sergeant Falchum looked a bit awkward and said, as the elevator reached the first floor, “My apologies. If you want me to call you Haley, you can call me Emily…as long as we are not around one of my superiors.”

Lily added, as the three women got out, “You can just call me Lily as well. I never liked being reduced to a number either.”

Emily just nodded as she led the two prisoners to the processing office. As she opened the door, she told them, “You will be out of here soon enough. Once you two sign your release and enlistment contracts, we can get the keys to your suppressor collars and Haley’s gloves.”

Haley insisted, “I will want to retrieve my belongings once we are processed out of here. A couple of my things should come in handy for military work.”

Emily looked intrigued as she led Lily and Haley inside the processing office.

Lily and Haley each sat down next to each other as Emily went to talk with the woman running the processing office. A pair of prison guards stood at attention inside of the room. Soon, Emily beckoned Lily and Haley over to the office’s main desk. There, they were each presented with their release and enlistment contracts.

Emily explained, “Once you sign these, you will be considered Privates in the Terranoran Army. The contracts will also negate the remainder of your prison sentences. We will then go to pick up your things at the holding lockers.”

Haley immediately picked up the pen she had been given and got to work looking over her contract. Lily did the same. Once she was sure that there was nothing hidden in the agreement, Lily signed her contract. Haley had already signed hers by the time that Lily wrote her signature.

Emily then took the two contracts for safekeeping. The woman running the processing office then handed Lily a key. She also handed Haley two keys, one of them was larger than the other.

Lily smiled, knowing that this was the key to her suppressor collar. She turned the key in
the lock and felt a brief but potent surge of arcane power flowing through her body. She rubbed her neck, feeling relieved that the metal ring was finally off of her and much earlier than expected.

Lily then looked over and saw Haley having unlocked and removed her own suppressor collar. Haley had mentioned earlier that she was not a magic user. The collar had only been locked around her neck to prevent her from using her fiery breath while in custody. Haley then took the smaller key and used it unlock the two leather gloves she was wearing. Haley seemed happy to be free of her gloves and collar.

The restraining items were given to the woman managing the office. Emily then told Lily and Haley, “You two will be coming with me now. We will retrieve your belongings, change you two out of your prison clothes and head over to the barracks.”

Haley simply saluted Emily, as did Lily soon after. The two women then followed the Sergeant down the hall. Lily knew that she the only belongings she had in her locker were a casual shirt, a pair of pants and some boots. Haley, on the other hand, seemed to have some items she was desperate to be reunited with. Lily was admittedly curious to see what Haley had in her locker.
Lily, Haley and Emily were all standing in a large room on the prison’s first floor ringed by lockers where prisoner’s possessions were kept during their incarceration. Lily had already opened up her locker and taken out the set of clothes that had been inside of it. She was to go and get changed once Haley had retrieved her things.

Lily then looked over and saw Haley looking frantically through her locker. Haley then breathed a deep sigh of relief and said, “I was so worried that they threw it away. Thankfully, its right here.”

Haley triumphantly held up a what looked like a sheet of paper that had been folded multiple times.

Lily realized something and asked Haley, “Was that the note…”

Haley replied, “Yes, this is the same note that my mother left with me when I was dropped off at the Scralville Orphanage. I have kept it ever since I was old enough to read.”

Emily gave Haley an inquisitive look and asked, “You said that something left in your locker would be helpful for military work?”

Haley nodded and then reached back into her locker. She pulled out a pair of faux gold covered, wickedly sharp, blades. The long knives had a strange curve to their blades, which curved downwards a bit past the hilt. Lily was not sure how someone would effectively stab an enemy with such a weapon. The blades looked like they were designed for slashing.

Emily got a glint in her eyes and walked over to examine Haley’s blades up close. She smiled and said, “If memory serves, these are kukri knives? They are pretty rare in most of the world. How did you get this pair? They look both elegant and deadly.”

Haley replied, “My mother left these with me at the orphanage. I started training with them when I was just fourteen. There are no blades in the world I would be more comfortable with using than these.”

Emily admitted, “Your mother, whoever she was, had good taste in weaponry. I would love to have met her. By the way, where is Scralville?”

Haley replied, “The Northern Coast of Dalugon. It is located on the tip of a small peninsula.”

Emily turned a bit pale and said, “Dalugon, I have only been there once. It was six years ago. More importantly, that is where we believe the invading armies have come from. I would be careful if I were you, Haley. I have heard reports that many of the upper-ranking officers of the enemy army are either dragons, or are descended from dragons.”

Haley seemed concerned. She replied, “I did hear stories of the mighty dragon lands to the south in my youth. Maybe they are involved in this invasion? Thank you for the warning. I might not want to go around telling other soldiers the location of my hometown. Still, if these invaders did come from Dalugon. Then, I can’t help but fear that Scralville could have been attacked and possibly overrun…”

Emily sighed and then told Haley, “You and Lily should get your things packed and get
changed into your regular clothes. We have a car waiting outside to take us to the base. There, you two will be issued your uniforms and equipment.”

Haley just nodded and saluted Emily. She and Lily were able to get changed into their normal clothes in private rooms. Lily now wore a light-blue shirt instead of her white prison shirt. Emily and Lily were both surprised to see Haley in a slightly-sparkly silver shirt. Lily had not been aware of her former cellmate having that kind of fashion sense before.

Haley put her things in a backpack she had retrieved from her locker. She and Lily then followed Emily through a series of hallways and then outside of the prison. Lily squinted a bit at the sun, doing her best to adjust her eyes to the light.

Emily then pointed to a nearby six-wheeled military car painted in dark blue. The automobile had a symbol that looked like the head of a white unicorn on the front hood. Emily got in the front seat next to the driver and then she ordered Lily and Haley to get in the back seat.

As the car began to drive out of the prison courtyard and into the city proper, Lily could not help but still feel intense surprise at all that had happened that day so far. She was out of prison now. However, she was not yet a free woman. She was going to have to go and fight in a war that she still did not know much about. She knew that she would have to follow whatever orders her superiors gave her. This was not going to be like being in a street gang. There would be a real hierarchy and also a more real risk of not surviving. While Lily was concerned about becoming a casualty of the war, she knew that fighting and surviving could be her best chance for a better life in the long term. She would have to be tough and do her best.

Suddenly, as Lily was still deep in thought, she heard Haley mentioned, “Sergeant Falchum, I know that Lily here will become a military arcanist. As for myself, I would like to recommend to be assigned to recon duty. I am not great with heavy weapons or shields. I am trained at stealth and the use of lighter weapons, like my kukris, and some firearms.”

Emily replied, “So, you’re like me in that case. Still, I will see if we can put that recommendation in for you. For now, we are heading to our base. I will take you two to the armory to get your uniforms and gear ready. …Lily, what weapons can you use proficiently?”

Lily admitted, “Maybe knives? I have never used a gun before, to be honest.”

Emily looked back over at Lily as they drove through the city, smiled at her and told her, “Fortunately for you, I think I might be the perfect person to give you a crash course.”

Haley volunteered, “I think I can help with that. I think we should start Lily off with a light pistol of some kind. I tend to be better with rifles, though.”

Lily just nodded, she had no objections to her first firearm being small. It was not like it would be her main means of offense anyway. She would certainly find ample uses for her magic on the battlefield.

A couple of hours later, Lily was standing in an armory room of a Terranoran Army base near the center of Agharta. She was wearing her own dark blue uniform with two white stripes going down from her each side of her neck to her waist. Lily’s uniform was essentially unarmored. Examining a semi-automatic rifle she had taken off of one of the racks nearby was Haley. The young half-dragoness had gotten her wish and had been classified as a recon soldier. Her lightly-armored dark blue and white uniform and the binoculars hanging around her neck indicated as much. Haley’s binoculars were modified to allow her to use them despite the positioning of her eyes on the sides of her head. She had tested them out earlier and found them quite satisfactory.
Haley’s pair of kukris were sheathed at her belt. One at each of her hips.

Emily entered the armory room through a side door holding a belt with a combat knife and a semi-automatic pistol. The knife was sheathed on one side of the belt. The pistol was holstered on the other side. Emily told Lily, “This belt is for you. The pistol is not loaded at the moment.”

Haley asked Emily, as she sighted the unloaded rifle she was holding, “Can I keep this gun?”

Emily gave Lily her weapons belt, which she began putting on. She then smiled at Haley and told her, “The VT-SAR, Vargas Technologies Semi-Automatic Rifle, is a pretty well-appreciated weapon. I would not enter an active combat zone without mine. So yes, you should keep it. By the way, I have gotten your barracks assignments figured out. You two will be sharing a bunk bed. You will have to decide who gets the top bunk.”

Haley then nodded and suggested, “Should we take Lily here to a firing range? I think that she could use a few starting lessons on how to shoot. I could also use some practice with my new rifle.”

Emily grinned and then told Lily and Haley, “Follow me, we will pick up some clips of blanks and get you two shooting. We don’t exactly have the time to give most new recruits the full basic training lately anyway. Therefore, any practice you can get will be valuable.”

Lily had come to realize that the Terranoran Army was doing its best to expand rapidly and get new recruits into the field. They had to be somewhat desperate to have resorted to recruiting convicts at this rate. Still, she did not blame them for giving Haley the offer. Her combat experience and sense of justice could lead to her becoming a model soldier. As for herself, Lily was less sure of her own potential in the situation she had been thrust into.

Emily took Lily and Haley to a nearby firing range where Lily and Haley’s weapons were loaded up with clips of blanks. Emily was a patient, focused and effective instructor. Lily could easily see the raven-haired Sergeant’s expertise in the instructions she gave the new Privates. Lily had always liked to think that she had decent reflexes and hand-eye coordination. While Haley was clearly a vastly better shot than she was, Lily found herself doing a decent job hitting the targets with Emily’s assistance.

Haley had clearly handled rifles before. She took quick and precise aim with her weapon, getting bullseyes on her targets multiple times and reloading with impressive speed. Lily could see herself asking to be assigned to the same unit as Haley and not just for the company. Now that Lily was seeing something of Haley’s combat prowess for herself, she wanted to be in the same squad as her.

After a few hours of shooting practice and exercise, Emily dismissed Lily and Haley to their barracks. The two women found themselves putting away their things nearby their corner bunk bed. This particular barracks did not have many other new recruits in it recently. Most of the soldiers stationed there had shipped out in the last few days according to Emily. Lily had ended up just letting Haley have the top bunk. The next day their week of accelerated basic training was to begin. They were likely to be shipped out to either Southern or Western Terranor after that.

When it was about ten minutes until lights out, Lily was sitting on her new bed, pondering all that had happened in the last day. She almost wondered if she was dreaming and still in her prison cell.

Lily saw Haley walking over to stand in front of her. She looked down at Lily and then
seemed to hesitate for a moment. Lily looked up at Haley, who asked her, “I have to ask you, why did you accept Captain Benson’s offer? You know that you will have to follow any and all orders you are given. Also, you must be aware that you will be risking your life, as will I.”

Lily replied, “If you must know, I was thinking that if I earn a good service record in this war and get honorably discharged I could increase my chances of being admitted to the Agharta Academy of Magic when this is all over. Besides, I would still be in my cell, alone if I had rejected the offer.”

Haley sighed a bit and said, “I should warn you that nothing prepares you for real combat. You told me that you have been in a few scrapes before. Still, you have not faced foes like those you will face in a real battle. If we get assigned to the same unit, I will do my best to protect you. However, I will expect you to keep me covered as well.”

Lily looked Haley in the eyes and told her, “Agreed. Honestly, I am hoping that the two of us get put in the same squad. …I was quite impressed by your displays of skill earlier today.”

Haley chuckled a bit and told Lily, “I don’t know who is behind this invasion. However, it seems to have been unprovoked. If these Dalugonians threaten innocent people, here then I will help fight them. I will do so even if some Terranorans distrust me. Besides, if it turns out that they have attacked my home town, then I will have a personal reason to see them brought down. I won’t allow Scralville to go unavenged if it has been assaulted.”

Lily just nodded, despite Haley’s abnormal facial structure, she could tell that the half-dragoness was deadly serious. Lily found the ease with which Haley committed to causes both strange and admirable. Maybe she had some things to learn from her former cellmate that were unrelated to combat. Lily asked Haley, “By the way, what is up with your sparkly silver shirt? It’s a little…obvious?”

Haley chuckled again and replied, “Let’s be honest, I stick out in most crowds already. I like wearing silvery clothes because I thought I might as well dress in a non-standard color? I think it creates an interesting contrast with my scales anyway.”

Lily admitted, “I always just preferred light blue myself. I know that it’s a common color…”

Haley replied, “That’s your prerogative. I understand why you would not be as interested in having a unique look. Either way, we should be getting to bed now. We will start our accelerated basic training tomorrow. Be ready to be up early, ok?”

Lily saluted Haley, who chuckled one last time. Haley then told Lily, “Goodnight.”

Lily got into her new bed soon before the lights went out in the barracks. She was still wondering what sorts of enemies she would face when she was deployed. More than that, she just hoped that she would be assigned to the same unit as Haley. She did not want to leave the company of the person who was the closest thing to a friend she had right now.
Transit to the Frontlines

The week following Lily and Haley’s release from prison was intense to be sure. As Spring sprung in Central Terranor, the two women joined a batch of other new recruits in the accelerated basic training course.

It became obvious rather quickly that Haley would have been the “head of the class” if there was such a distinction being given out. Her enhanced strength and previous combat experience allowed her to excel at whatever tasks the new Privates were assigned. Haley had been allowed to keep her pair of kukris for use in combat. She had also kept the semi-automatic rifle that Sergeant Emily Falchum had given her and had continuously proven herself to be an excellent markswoman.

As for Lily, she was fortunate to have been given an alternate series of training exercises. Since she was going to be a combat arcanist, much of her training involved practicing spells. Of course, there was still plenty of physical exercise and weapons practice. Lily became reasonably proficient with her new pistol and was able to draw, fire and reload it quite quickly by the end of the week.

Lily had always focused on sound and force based magic. She had enjoyed sonic spells because the loud noise they generated intimidated opponents. Scaring foes away was valuable in street fights. Force magic could be useful for knocking enemies over and pushing them away, both also useful strategies in gang brawls.

Lily was not even sure what had become of her fellow gang members. Most of them had been sent to the main floor of Agharta’s prison after the initial roundup. She had not bothered to ask if any of them had been enlisted into the Terranoran Army. For the time being, she was more focused on getting through her training. She did not want to dwell on her past anyway. She had given an avenue to move forward with her life, even though there were serious risks involved. She intended to put her past behind her. What other choice did she have now anyway?

When the week of training concluded, Lily had been given her deployment orders. She was now back in the barracks sitting on her bunk bed and looking over the orders she had been given. That night would be her last night in Agharta for the time being. She was to report in to a military truck at the base’s gate the next morning at 9:00 AM. From there, she and some other soldiers would be taken to Agharta’s Trevelyan Station where they would board a commandeered civilian train that would take them to the mining town of Buraso in Western Terranor. The Terranoran Army had set up a series of camps and trenches around the town. It was part of their plan to try to halt and contain the enemy’s advance on the Western Front, even as they continued to advance up the Ruvian Peninsula. The unit Lily was to report to once in Buraso was called the 14th Special Actions Platoon.

As Lily was wondering what “Special Actions Platoon” meant, she saw Haley walking into the room in her uniform. Haley was carrying a sheet of paper with her own deployment orders written on it.

Lily somewhat nervously asked Haley, “So, what unit were you assigned to?”

Haley replied, “The 14th Special Actions Platoon stationed nearby Buraso in Western Terranor. It says that I am to report in to a Captain Joland. That sounds like a Eulidian last name.”

Lily smiled at Haley as she stood up from her bed. She announced, “I guess we are going to war together. I was given the exact same assignment!” Lily then checked her deployment orders and saw that Captain Joland was also listed as her commanding officer.
Haley nodded and told Lily, “I guess that the two of us will be watching each other’s backs after all.”

Lily smiled and told Haley, “We made an agreement, one that I intend to see through to the end. By the way, do you know that a ‘Special Actions Platoon’ is?”

Haley seemed to smile back at Lily, she then told her, “They are sort of like ranger units in other armies. They are considered more elite than regular soldiers. However, they are not special forces. We should both be honored that one of those squads would take us. This Captain Joland must either need more soldiers with our skill sets, or they are just desperate to fill their unit’s roster.”

Lily was a bit surprised to hear Haley implicitly putting herself down for once. She added, “I guess we will have to go meet with our Captain and find out for ourselves. As for the Eulidian-sounding last name. I did hear that Eulidia went through a civil war recently. It was only ended late last year if memory serves. I am just glad that their new government no longer puts homosexuals to death, like the old one did.”

Haley nodded and mentioned, “I do remember hearing about that. Some of the other recruits were talking about it during a break a couple of days ago.”

Lily replied, “We should be getting some rest soon. We will be shipping out tomorrow.”

Haley nodded and asked Lily, “One more thing, you seem more determined than earlier. You weren’t this way when I first met you less than a month ago…”

Lily interjected, knowing that Haley had a point, “Maybe it was the training? I have to be confident if I am going into combat soon. Besides, I have spent enough of my life feeling sorry for myself. I might as well be assertive for once.”

Haley simply nodded again and went to go get changed out of her uniform. Lily had not wanted to admit it, but she knew that Haley had been a big influence on her. She had discovered a desire to emulate her former cellmate. Haley was possibly the best role model Lily had ever had. She had not had many people to look up to when she was younger.

The next morning, Lily and Haley woke up together and got their backpacks ready. Once they were prepared, they left their barracks for the last time and made their way to the front gate of the base. There, they found the truck they were to board. It was one of eight trucks waiting by the gate. The dark blue vehicle had six wheels and its rear section was covered by a heavy sheet of canvas. It was a transport vehicle, not meant for frontline combat. Once all of the trucks were boarded, the procession of vehicles set off for Trevelyan Station.

Lily and Haley arrived at the station and disembarked along with the other soldiers. Some of them were new recruits, some of them were soldiers being transferred to the Western Front from being stationed in Agharta. Trevelyan Station was a grand edifice of steel, glass and stone. It was one of Terranor’s main transportation hubs. Lily had never been inside of it before. She had walked nearby it a few times in her youth. Once inside, the two Privates managed to find the commandeered train they were to board at platform 8. On the way, they noticed a pair of armored dark blue and white military trains carrying heavy equipment such as machine gun turrets and light artillery pieces waiting to leave the station.

The two Privates did not have exact seating assignments for the trip to Buraso. The pair of former cellmates ended up finding a place to sit near the rear of one of the train’s passenger cars. The two of them each took a window seat across from each other after putting their packs with their equipment in the compartments above their seats.
As the train was about to start moving, Lily mentioned, “This is my first train ride. To be honest, I have never left Agharta before.”

Haley replied, “I took a train from the City of Peralho located at the southern tip of Ruvia to Agharta. I have also taken a couple of rail trips back in Dalugon. It seems like this invasion must not have begun all that much longer after I arrived in Agharta and my legal troubles began.”

As the train began to lurch out of Trevelyan Station, Lily looked out at the city as they began to pick up speed. As the train began to make its way out of the Terranoran capital city, she heard some loud noises coming from overhead. There were at least forty airplanes, craft made of metal wires and canvas covering with some light metal plating, flying above Agharta. Most of them looked like they were heading south. A few of them were headed west. Presumably, these planes were headed to airfields closer to the frontlines. They were not going to reach a combat zone flying directly from Agharta’s airfields.

A few hours passed before the train reached its first stop. That stop being the farming town of Plaincrest located only about a day’s walk from Agharta. There, the train was to pick up a few more soldiers headed for the Western Front. The conductors had informed the passengers that there would be only one more stop, the City of Fabasu, before they reached Buraso the next morning.

The stop at Plaincrest was supposed to only take around an hour at most. The stop at Fabasu was supposed to be for the night. The train’s crew did not want to risk night travel so close to the frontlines. If any enemy units attacked the train, they would have cover of darkness.

When it seemed like the train was about to get moving again, Lily had her head turned to look out the window. Suddenly, she heard a friendly sounding female voice from behind her ask, “Pardon me, are these two seats taken?”

Realizing that the new arrival had to mean the seats next to Lily and Haley that were next to the aisle, Lily turned around and saw a young deep elf woman wearing an unarmored Terranoran Army Privates’ uniform standing in the aisle. She was looking over at Lily and Haley and smiling slightly.

Haley turned to the deep elf girl and told her, “Nope. You can sit with us if you would like.”

Lily now got a better look at the deep elf, she had the gray skin and red eyes common to her species. Her silvery hair was kept back in a long ponytail. A long black rapier hung off of her belt along with a combat knife. A bolt-action rifle, an older variety of firearm, was strapped across her back. Lily wondered if she was another combat arcanist. The lack of armor on her uniform seemed to indicate as much.

The deep elf girl nodded at Haley and saluted her despite the being the same rank as the half-dragoness. She then turned down the aisle towards the front of the train car and called out, “Hey Howard, I found us two seats!”

The deep elf girl took a seat next to Lily after putting her backpack in the overhead compartment. A man’s voice called out, “I’m coming. Be there in just a minute.”

The deep elf extended her hand to shake Lily’s, as footsteps could be heard coming their way. Lily shook her hand as the young woman smiled at her and said, “Private Tala Guissel at your service. My friend Howard should be here in just a moment.”

Lily was about to give her name when she looked up and did her best to hide the surprise on her face when Howard appeared in the aisle. The first thing that Lily registered as he was putting his
pack in the overhead compartment next to Tala’s was that he was another half dragon. His head was reptilian in nature and covered with shiny golden scales. His face was smoother then Haley’s and his mouth was closer to that of a regular humanoid. The second thing that caught Lily’s eye was that Howard’s heavily armored uniform was light blue with a single orange stripe running from his neck to his waist. The design was effectively the same as the other Terranoran Army uniforms she had seen before. However, the coloration was obviously different. A symbol that looked like a small light blue and orange bullseye flanked one each side by a white unicorn hung from his neck. The armor plates on his shoulders each bore two stripes marking him as a Corporal. Finally, Lily noticed a warhammer at his belt as well as a heavy revolver. A heavy metal shield had also been strapped to his back.

Haley saluted Howard and Lily soon followed her example. As the train began to slowly make its way out of Plaincrest Station, Howard sat down next to Haley.

Howard looked Lily and Haley over and said, “Priest Corporal Howard Torrance. I see that you have already met my friend Private Guissel. You two are?”

Lily spoke first this time, saying, “Private Lily, just Lily to be honest. This is my friend Haley.”

Haley gave Lily a quick look of what seemed to be surprise. She recovered fast and added, “Yes… Private Haley at your service, sir.”

Tala asked Lily and Haley, “Why don’t you two have last names?”

Haley replied, “We are both orphans, to be honest. The two of us have only known each other for about a month or less. Out of curiosity, Corporal Torrance, I see that you are wearing a United Church Militia uniform. I heard during training that General Woodstock assigned most of them to guard the Eastern Coast against a possible naval offensive.”

Howard sighed and responded, “That is all true. However, I was one of the few who asked to serve with the main army. I figured that they could use as many healers as possible.”

Tala added, “Howard and I have been friends since childhood. I think he asked to be assigned to the regular army because I got drafted into it.”

Lily asked Tala, “Are they just drafting normal citizens off the streets at this point?”

Tala replied, “Actually, I was studying at the Agharta Academy of Magic before the war broke out. As a sorceress, I was considered a high-priority draftee.”

Tala suddenly became a lot more interesting to Lily. Howard then explained, “We were stationed in Plaincrest after some basic training in Agharta. Someone named Lieutenant Carlton put in an order for me to be transferred to Buraso. I was able to get Tala transferred to the same unit. Once we arrive at the frontlines, we will learn what unit we are going to be assigned to.”

Haley asked Howard, “If you don’t mind me asking, Corporal, you must be a half-Fadalian Dragon. However, your name and accent are Terranoran? Where are you and Tala from originally?”

Tala replied for Howard, “Playamar, actually. My family has lived there since the late 1760s.”

Howard added, “Yes, my father is a Fadalian Dragon. Ryu-Hirotaige is his name. He met my human mother during a family vacation to Fadalia soon after the Second Civil War. My mother has had to raise me mostly by herself with my father mostly tied to his clan duties in Fadalia.”
Thankfully, I had my extended family and sometimes Tala’s family there to help.”

Tala pointed out, “Howard’s dad is a good guy at heart. He is just somewhat torn between responsibilities.”

Howard finished, “I joined the United Church at my mother’s encouragement. Faith has been a good companion for me. I was going to have to serve in this war one way or another. At least I was able to make sure I would be there for Tala in this conflict.”

Haley asked, “Do you two know any details about the invaders we are being sent to fight? All Lily and I have been told is that they came from somewhere in Dalugon and that they are being led by dragons.”

Tala admitted, “We were told that new recruits would be given extended briefings once we arrived at the front. We know that the enemy soldiers wear grey armor that covers most of their bodies and helmets that cover their faces. The patches on their shoulders are the only colorful parts of their uniforms. We have also heard some reports of dragons and other dangerous creatures acting as shock troops and even commanders for their armies. There have also been reports of a significant number of half-dragon soldiers and officers in the enemy army.”

Howard added, “Because my father’s species is not commonly found on Dalugon, I think I am likely to face more derision for my religious affiliation than for my appearance. Haley, you might want to be careful. By the way, where were the two of you raised?”

Lily sighed and replied, “An orphanage in one of the worst parts of Agharta, sadly. I would prefer not to talk about it.” She did not want to admit her having recently been incarcerated to Howard and Tala. She was not sure how they would take it.

Haley sighed deeply, her fists clenched and quietly admitted, “I was raised in the orphanage of Scralville on the northern coast of Dalugon. I don’t know exactly who these enemies are. However, I fear that they have conquered my home town in their drive north towards Terranor. I can assure the two of you that I harbor no sympathies for those we are to fight against.”

Tala quickly assured Haley, “We don’t think that you are a spy or anything. You seem like a nice person. Hopefully, you can find out what happened to your hometown when we reach the frontlines. Hopefully, some officer there will know more about what’s going and be willing to divulge more details.”

Howard added, “What concerns me more is that none of the Domain of Terranor’s allies have rallied to our aid as of now. The Northern Mutual Defense Coalition has sent a small expeditionary force to the Western Front, but is currently mired in bureaucracy. The Flame Duchy is staying out of the war altogether and my father’s homeland, the Republic of Fadalia, has only sent moral support and a few scattered volunteers so far.”

Lily replied, “It does seem like the Terranoran Army needs whatever help it can get right now.”

Tala nodded and asked Lily, “On a less-depressing topic, are you an arcanist, Lily? I noticed that your uniform is pretty much identical to mine.”

Lily nodded and said, “Yes, I was born a sorceress. Sadly, I have not been able to hone my skills in an academic setting like you have. I would like to hear more about the Agharta Academy of Magic from you. I was hoping to apply there after the war.”
Tala smiled at Lily as Haley asked Howard, “I actually do have a few questions regarding your faith, Corporal Torrance.”

Howard seemed intrigued as Tala began telling Lily about her experiences at the Agharta Academy of Magic. As Haley began talking with Howard, Lily listened intently to what Tala told her. She hoped that it would come in handy after the war.

The commandeered train made its way across the Terranoran countryside at full speed, reaching Fabasu that evening. The train restocked and refueled that evening in the city’s station. It also took on a few more reinforcements heading for Buraso. That night, Lily, Haley and their comrades in arms had to sleep on the train as it stayed in the relative safety of Fabasu Station.

Lily fell asleep happy to have met Tala. The young deep elf had been quite helpful. Her general pleasantness was refreshing for Lily as well. Lily almost felt guilty that she had not admitted her criminal past to Tala. However, Haley had not divulged that information to Howard either. As Lily dozed off, she wondered what tomorrow would bring. That would be the day when she and Haley would join the 14th Special Actions Platoon and meet Captain Joland.
Hello readers, I just wanted to mention that this chapter is where the story begins to reference Convergence more "deeply," if that makes sense. However, it will not continue to make such references all of the time. The term "Flamehawk" that appears in this chapter's title and in the chapter proper comes from that story. Some author's notes on one of the later chapters of Convergence (Number 23) also explain that term's origin in a more meta sense. Regardless, I hope that you all are enjoying the story and continue to do so.

The next morning, the commandeered train carrying soldiers to Buraso nearby the Terranoran Army's western frontlines departed from Fabasu station. The train was on its way at the crack of dawn. The passengers had had to sleep on the train to save time that would have been lost re-boarding that morning. The train made its way to the mining town of Buraso’s small train station at full speed. It pulled in just before noon. From Buraso Station, the new recruits and recently transferred soldiers headed for the camp just west of the town.

Lily and Haley were able to board a military truck that was heading for the main camp. It seemed like there were not enough officers around to direct all of the reinforcements to their unit assignments. Howard and Tala had gotten off of the train after saying goodbye and good luck to Lily and Haley. They were off to try and locate Lieutenant Carlton and find out what their assignments would be.

After a short drive, Lily and Haley got off of the truck and looked around at the sprawling campsite. There were tents and trucks everywhere. The camp had a few small groups of artillery cannons, both long range and shorter range. They did not seem well organized for the moment. Soldiers of varying species and skin colors were performing various tasks around the encampment. In the distance, towards the west, Lily swore she could hear the sound of artillery fire.

As Lily and Haley were walking through the camp, trying to locate the command tent for the 14th Special Actions Platoon, Haley turned to Lily and asked her, “I have to ask, when we met Howard and Tala, why did you say that we were friends?”

Lily looked a bit hurt and felt more than a little concerned. She asked Haley in return, “What else would we be? We agreed to have each other’s backs, remember?”

Haley seemed to be mulling something over for a minute. She then smiled at Lily and replied, “Yeah, I guess that we are friends. Besides, I like to think that I have begun to bring out a better side of you since we first met.”

Lily knew that Haley was just the type to like to think that she was making those around her better people. Deciding to be honest with Haley, Lily simply replied, “You really are my first friend, Hales. I am glad that I met you, no matter what happens next.”

Haley looked a bit surprised and chuckled. She mentioned, “You called me ‘Hales.’ That’s what I said my friends called me when we first met. I guess we really are friends then, Lil.”
Lily blushed a bit, realizing that Haley had just given her a nickname. The nickname that Lily had called Haley was not even one that she had come up with.

As Lily was wondering how to reply, she heard a somewhat-familiar voice, saying, “Fancy meeting you two here.”

Lily saw Haley raise her clawed hand in a salute. She quickly did the same. The two of them saw Lieutenant Ruby Benson walking over to them. Ruby was wearing the same uniform she had been wearing when Lily and Haley had been brought before her and Captain Emmet Benson, who Lily suspected was a relative of hers. However, there was now a bolt-action rifle at her back and a combat knife at her belt.

Ruby told Lily and Haley, “At ease. Now, what unit were you two assigned to?”

Haley replied, “The 14th Special Actions Platoon, ma’am.”

Ruby sighed and rolled her eyes and bit, clenching her fists at the same time. She then looked the two ex-convicts in the eyes and told them, “If that was the unit you got assigned to, then good luck. I mean that. Anyway, I can show you two most of the way to their command tent.”

Haley and Lily saluted Ruby, who spun on her heel and began to lead the two Privates deeper into the camp.

As the trio made its way to the command tent, Ruby mentioned, “I heard from Sergeant Falchum that you did an excellent job in training, Private Haley. It seems that my older brother made a good choice in selecting you to be given the release offer.”

Haley replied, “Thank you, ma’am. If you do not mind my asking, is there something we should know about the unit that we have been assigned to?”

Ruby turned to look at Haley as the trio neared a series of five large tents. She looked around to make sure there was nobody listening in and explained, “The Captain of the 14th is someone who I don’t think was ready for her commission. I have known her for years, so I am not saying this lightly. Thankfully, her second in command is someone who’s judgement I trust a bit more. That unit is shaping up to be the ‘oddball’ Special Actions Platoon. Of the fifteen that our army has. Only five of them are stationed in this vicinity.”

Ruby walked forward a bit and pointed to a large tent that someone had painted a unique symbol on. Upon closer inspection, it looked like a pair of fiery wings pointed upward.

Ruby started walking over to another tent. This one was painted with what appeared to be a vicious three-headed dog on it. The number II was painted just below the monster. She told Haley and Lily, “The tent with the flaming wings painted on it is where your new squad is based out of. As for what I said earlier, the Captain of the 14th already knows what I think of her commission. Of course, she does not care much. Best of luck to you two.”

Haley, and then Lily, saluted Ruby, who then returned their salutes. The two Privates began to make their way over to the command tent. Haley was a couple steps ahead of Lily. As for Lily, she just hoped that the Captain of the 14th was actually competent. Hopefully, she had not just been given her commission due to a lack of other qualified candidates, or due to personal connections.

Haley led the way to the command tent with the fiery wings just above its main flap. With Lily right behind her, Haley carefully opened up the tent flap. Lily heard a woman’s voice calling, “You must be Haley. Please, come inside.”
Haley did as she was told, Lily soon followed her inside of the tent. At the center of the command tent was a large war table showing a map of the Western Front with various positions marked on it. There was also one large bed, a few simple wooden chairs and two weapons racks. Standing behind the table was a human woman with pale skin, long jet-black hair and a slightly-rounded face. She was wearing an unarmored Terranoran Army Captain’s uniform with a knife and a semi-automatic pistol at her belt.

Standing at another side of the table was a light-skinned woman with long blonde hair. This human Lieutenant was wearing a female United Church uniform with roughly the same armor plating and holy symbol that Howard’s uniform had featured. A longsword, combat knife, heavy shield and heavy revolver were all at her belt.

The black-haired woman looked the two new arrivals over as they stood at attention side by side in front of the war table. She smiled and said, “It looks like our final two recruits have arrived. Private’s Lily and Haley. You two should be grateful that I decided to take the two of you. Few other units were interested in a pair of convicted criminals. Still, I looked over your records and saw some potential.”

Haley simply replied, “Reporting for duty, ma’am.”

The Captain simply nodded and told the two Privates, “At ease you two. By the way, I am Captain Elena Joland. This is my second-in-command Lieutenant Juliana Carlton.”

Juliana added, “Second in command and wife that is. Regardless, welcome to the 14th Special Actions Platoon. Or, as our Captain has dubbed it, Flamehawk Squadron.”

It looked almost like a lightbulb went off above Haley’s head. She asked, “It all makes sense now… You are Elena Joland, the Flamehawk of Austean! I must say that it is quite a privilege to meet the woman who both killed Tom Arthus and spearheaded the recent overthrow of the Eulidian government.”

Elena seemed to smirk a bit. She replied, “I guess that news of my accomplishments has spread far and wide.” She then looked over at Juliana and added, “To be fair, I was never fighting unaided. Juliana may be my most constant companion, but she is not the only one I have had in my adventures.”

Lily did not know what Elena and Haley were talking about. However, she certainly got the impression that her new commanding officer was someone very important. She was at least heartened to learn that the commanders of Flamehawk Squadron were women like her.

Juliana suggested to Elena, “I think we should explain our situation to these two before we send them to Sergeant Adams’s detachment. They have as much a right to know who and what we are facing as anyone else here does.”

Elena nodded and asked Haley and Lily, “Alright, so what have the two of you been told about the enemy?”

Lily decided to speak up this time. She explained, “We were told that they have come from somewhere in Dalugon. They have been reported to have multiple dragons among their officers. Also, their soldiers wear gray uniforms with helmets that hide their faces and have patches with varying coloration on their shoulders.”

Elena nodded and sighed, saying, “It seems like I will have to fill you two in on some things. I believe that everyone who fights should know who they are fighting and why. In our case,
it is because Terranor has come under attack from the enemy. I was offered this Captain’s commission soon after the war began. The Terranoran government knew of my escapades and wanted me fighting in their forces. I might have never had a formal military education. However, I have read plenty of military history books and my father was an acclaimed military man in his time.”

Lily started to see why Ruby was concerned about Elena having been giving her command. However, she just kept listening as Elena continued, “Getting to the point, the enemy forces call themselves the Draconic Reconquest Army or DRA. We believe that the DRA is the result some sort of alliance formed by the Dragons Lords and Ladies of Southern and Central Dalugon. Most of the normally reclusive Dragon Lands have banded together to form this force. However, we still do not know much about their internal politics. Also, we don’t know who the mastermind behind the DRA is, if there is even one in particular. We believe that the DRA overwhelmed Northern Dalugon before launching their invasion of Terranor. The House Arthus was all but destroyed in the process.”

Haley gasped and then clenched her fists. She said, a firm conviction in her voice, “In that case, the DRA has to have captured Scralville. There were powerful sea dragons who were supposed to protect the town. However, they most likely either joined the DRA, or were defeated. …I won’t let this stand.”

Juliana took over for her wife, explaining, “In terms of the overall tactical situation, the DRA had been successfully pushing up the southern peninsula of Ruvia for some time now. Despite having some terrain advantages in the mountainous regions, the Terranoran forces there are having to retreat again and again. Our navy has been deployed to the southern coasts. They have trying to hold back the enemy’s warships and disrupt their supply ships coming from Dalugon. However, the DRA invaded Western Terranor soon after their initial assault on the southern coastline. They have defeated most of the druids of the Western Plains and are pushing closer to the continental center where Agharta sits. Most of the United Church’s Militia has been deployed to the Eastern Coast to defend against any possible DRA attempts to attack Playamar Port and open up a third front. We don’t know how long we will have to defend our positions until their forces run out. Many of their soldiers seem to throw themselves into battle with less concern for their survival then you would expect.”

Elena finished, “What disgusts me the most is that it seems that most of the humanoid soldiers of the DRA have been culturally brainwashed. They seem to view themselves as living to serve their draconic masters. From what we can tell from DRA propaganda and internal communications we have intercepted, they believe that since dragons were the first sentient species to inhabit Austean, they have the right to rule her. To the DRA, the existing humanoid-run states are ineffective and squabble to much amongst themselves. They believe that they are ultimately doing the world a favor by bringing it under their despotic control.”

Haley replied, “I will do what I can to help put a stop to this madness, Captain.”

As Lily simply nodded in agreement with Haley, Juliana pointed out, “We did read the files on the two of you. Haley, you seem like someone with a strong moral compass who ended up on the wrong side of the law. You did very well in training and we have high expectations of you. Lily, you have clearly had a hard life. However, your arcane potential is still mostly unexplored.”

Elena chimed in, “Not that I support dishonesty, but I would pretend to be a Terranoran half-dragon if I were you, Haley. Anti-draconic and anti-Dalugonian sentiments are at a record high lately, as you can probably imagine.”
Juliana admitted, “At least this new war has helped Terranorans come together. As much as General Woodstock and those like her still mistrust those of my faith, most people seem to realize that we need to stand together in these trying times.”

Lily suddenly realized something and asked Juliana, “Ma’am, do you know of any other Lieutenant Carltons in this camp? We met a couple of soldiers, including a priest, on the train ride here who said that they had been transferred over here on the orders of a Lieutenant Carlton.”

Juliana smiled at Lily and said, “I think I know who you are talking about. Priest Corporal Torrance and Private Guissel, right?”

Lily nodded back at Juliana. She predicted what the blonde Lieutenant was about to say. Juliana continued, “I had them transferred here. I wanted another priest for Flamehawk Squadron. As much as Elena hates the church, she knows me well enough to know the skill set that our priests can bring to a squad.”

Elena admitted, “Juliana is only here with me because I insisted that she be made my second-in-command when I accepted my commission. I was not about to let myself be far away from my wife during such times. As for Howard and Tala, you two will be seeing a lot of them. You see, they were just here. I assigned them to the detachment I am building up under the command of Sergeant Chuck Adams. That also being where I am going to assign the two of you.”

Juliana added, “I picked Sergeant Adams personally. He is quite the admirer of our past work and, oddly enough, of Elena’s father. He will be the one that you two report to personally. Right now, he and his team should not be far away.”

Elena explained, “I will have someone come to take you to your detachment shortly. You two will be given your sleeping assignments soon. We are expecting a possible enemy assault on our trenches to the west any day now. I want your detachment ready to deploy to protect them. If we cannot hold the line here, we won’t be able to push farther west and start turning the tide of this war. Understood?”

Haley immediately saluted Elena, saying, “Yes, ma’am!”

Lily did the same. Juliana left the tent soon after to go find someone to take the new Privates to their detachment. As Lily and Haley were waiting, Elena focused herself on the map on her war table. Lily admitted that she was relieved that her new commanding officer was someone accepting and not too strict. It made sense now that this unit was willing to take soldiers other squads might scoff at. On the other hand, Lily was nervous that she would be seeing Howard and Tala again. At some point, they would have to learn about her criminal past. She also wondered what Sergeant Adams would be like and what other kinds of people would be in their detachment.
The Detachment

As Captain Elena Joland continued to look over her map of the region, Lily and Haley waited for Lieutenant Juliana Carlton to return to the command tent. It was not long until Juliana came back with a young feloid recon soldier in tow. The girl had tigress-like fur patterns on her face. The young soldier introduced simply as Kasha. She led Lily and Haley out of the tent and close to the Terranoran Army’s trench lines.

The trio closed in on a series of cover barricades just behind the reserve trenches. Nearby, a short-range heavy cannon being was being moved into position by a pair of dwarven soldiers and a team of short, reptilian, kobold engineers. Kasha was about to head over to another tiger feloid woman who was drilling with her rifle not far away. First, she pointed to a small cluster of soldiers nearby and said, “There is the detachment head, Sergeant Chuck Adams. You two are to report in to him.”

Haley nodded and saluted Kasha, who kept walking over to her fellow feloid. Lily looked over to the cluster of soldiers and saw Howard and Tala. She also saw two other soldiers. One of them was a light elf man with light skin and brown hair. He was wearing some medium Terranoran Army armor with Sergeant’s stripes. At his belt was a longsword and at his back was a semi-automatic rifle akin to Haley’s. Oddly enough, there was what appeared to be a long length of chain hanging off of his belt. At each end of the chain was a heavy spiked weight. The other soldier was a woman with light grey skin and silver hair up in a bun on her head. She was likely half-human and half-deep elf, judging by her appearance. Her lightly-armored uniform bore Corporal’s stripes on the shoulders. A large, wickedly sharp, curved blade that looked like it needed two hands to wield effectively was strapped to her back, as was a scoped sniper rifle. Finally, a pump-action combat shotgun was holstered at one of her hips. She seemed to be looking over a partially-disassembled rifle of some kind. It was clearly not a Vargas Technologies weapon.

The light elf man looked over to Lily and Haley and said, “I see that our last two recruits have arrived. Privates Lily and Haley, am I correct?”

Haley and Lily both nodded and saluted the light-elf sergeant as they walked over to him and the others. The two of them stood at attention once they were only a couple of feet away. Both women had learned to stand at attention during their accelerated training. Lily mainly engaged in basic military decorum so as to keep herself out of trouble. She wanted her service record to look good. The Domain of Terranor had never given her anything as far as she was concerned. However, she still wanted to be the best applicant to the Agharta Academy of Magic that she could be after the war.

The light elf soldier said, “At ease. Like our Captain and Lieutenant, I have looked over your files. As much as I am not thrilled about having ex-convicts in my unit. It is not my place to complain about our Captain’s decisions. Besides, Private Haley distinguished herself in training. Also, I cannot entirely blame her for doing what landed her in prison in the first place. Anyway, I am Sergeant Charles Adams. I prefer Chuck, however. Priestess Lieutenant Carlton hand-picked me to lead this detachment because of my family pedigree. However, I can assure you that I am not going to coast on that. I intend to do whatever I can to keep all of you alive and to see this continent withstand the foreign invasion she currently faces.”

Lily asked, “Sir, might I ask what family pedigree? Also, if I may, what is that chain at your belt?”

Chuck did not seem bothered by Lily’s question. He answered, “My grandmother was
Sapphire Coril, The Greatest Traitor. Perhaps you have heard of her? To add, my older sister Selina is the Wing Commander of Specter Squadron, the oldest and most decorated fighter unit in the Terranoran Air Corps. As you might also know, my grandmother was slain by the very General who now commands our armies, Sandra Woodstock. Her daughter, Major Tanya Woodstock is the commander of Special Actions Platoons eleven through fifteen. Selina and I joined the military to salvage our family’s legacy. Thankfully, Priestess Lieutenant Carlton sees my grandmother as a hero just as I do. As for the spiked chain, it is a rare Eulidian weapon that only those with the proper training and dexterity can wield. I find it an excellent weapon to channel my offensive magic through. I was inspired by the stories of the Eulidian war hero known as The Slayer of False Gods. Count Charles Joland, our Captain’s father as luck would have it.”

Howard stepped forward and added, “Speaking of our Captain and Lieutenant, I still find it bizarre that those two women can have such drastically different opinions on the concept of faith and still remain in love with each other. By the way, Lily, Haley, you did not tell us that you were incarcerated before your enlistment on the train.”

Tala stepped in and gave Howard a playful punch. She said, “I can honestly see why that was not something these two wanted to mention on the train ride here. Why would you want to tell potential new friends that you had recently been in prison? Besides, we are going to have to work together if we are to survive and win this war.”

Howard seemed to back down a bit. Haley said, “I must say that I have heard some stories about your grandmother, Sergeant. She defeated and slew the blademage General Verniel Pansar and the Order of Light’s High Priestess Sienna Toril during the first Terranoran Civil War. Of course, the follow up to that conflict did not end well for her, or the United Church of God, from what I understand.”

Chuck nodded and told Haley, “No divine intervention came to aid the church during the last civil war. None seems to be coming to help us this time either. I intend to do what I can to salvage my family’s legacy by defending my homeland from the DRA. My sister and I are both committed to working towards that goal.”

Lily’s head was spinning a bit internally. She was doing her best to follow to conversation so far. She had heard of Sapphire Cordwin Coril before. She knew that the fall of the Order of Light had made it possible for people like her to live openly in Terranor. As for the United Church of God, Lily had never been religious. She was like the strong majority of Terranorans born after the Second Rebellion’s victory in that sense. On the bright side, Lily had been glad when Tala had defended her and Haley. Maybe the deep elf girl would turn out to be her second friend? They were both arcanists born with their powers after all.

Lily was pulled back from her spacing out when the half-deep elf corporal walked over behind her and Haley and said, “Looking over that captured rifle, I can tell that the weapon was clearly produced with an eye towards simplicity and ease of use. However, it was not built for accuracy or penetrating power. It seems that the DRA’s leadership really do not care enough about their soldiers to manufacture quality equipment for most of them.”

Chuck nodded as Haley mentioned, “That rifle you were looking over appeared to be a Zeisscorp weapon. They are the biggest manufacturing conglomerate in Dalugon. I have fired a few of their guns in my day. I honestly think that Vargas Technologies makes higher quality weapons, based on my experience during training.”

The half deep elf smiled at Haley and told her, “You seem to know your stuff, Private. By the way, my name is Corporal Elisa Verite. I am this detachment’s sniper. Speaking of weapons,
those kukris at your belt are quite ornate. They look almost custom made?"

Haley replied, “I will tell you how I got them later, ma’am. Suffice to say that they were a gift from my mother. I have been using these for years. I do my best to keep them well-cleaned.”

Tala chimed in, “My rapier is actually a gift from my parents. It has been in the family since the late 1760s. They wanted me to carry it into battle since it is still as sharp as ever.”

Lily noticed that Tala’s rapier was a beautifully-designed, black-painted, steel weapon. It was certainly not standard issue. Lily then asked Elisa, “Corporal, if you are a sniper, why do you carry such a large blade with you?”

Elisa chuckled a bit and replied, “I used to just rely on my combat knife in close-quarters-combat. During an earlier engagement with the DRA, one of my bullets narrowly took down a pouncing enemy varg that was about to maul an orc warrior from the Northern Expeditionary Force. In thanks, he gave me this blade. It’s an orcish weapon they call a falchion. Sergeant Emily Falchum of the 12th Special Actions Platoon said that I was lucky to have earned it. She said that she was jealous. However, I am not even sure if she is trained to use melee weapons this big.”

Lily smiled and mentioned, “Haley and I met Sergeant Falchum when we were first recruited. She was the person who first taught me to fire a pistol.”

Haley added, “She was also quite impressed by my Kukris. We met her superior officer, Lieutenant Ruby Benson, around here recently. She helped us to find Flamehawk Squadron’s command tent.”

Chuck sighed and said, “Captain James Benson, Ruby’s older brother is the commander of the 12th Special Actions Platoon. They call their unit Cerberus II. They saw that it is to honor Antonio Woodstock’s Cerberus Battalion. Of course, Major Woodstock fights at the head of that unit when she enters combat. She and Emmet Benson are engaged, after all.”

Lily could easily tell that Chuck had no love for the Woodstock family. She knew that his grandmother had been killed by General Woodstock. Almost everyone in Terranor and many foreigners knew the story of how the Greatest Traitor had died.

Tala then pointed out, “I still think that your grandmother was a hero, Sergeant. She and her allies saved my great-grandparents from execution at Playamar Square during the First Rebellion. I would not be here without her and those who fought alongside her.”

Howard mentioned, “The ironic thing is that you are one of the last few blademages, Sergeant Adams. The Order of Light fostered the training of those with your skill set. In the end, you are continuing on the martial tradition of your grandmother’s former mentor and later nemesis, Verniel Pansar.”

Chuck simply nodded as Lily deiced to ask Elisa, “So, how did you end up in the military?”

Elisa replied, “My little sister, Clara and I joined up before the war broke out. I wanted to see new places and sights and she wanted to help save lives. Clara is a backline medic for our Special Actions Platoons. She is one of a rare sort of restorative magic-focused arcanists. She is not much of a fighter. However, we need all of the healers that we can get these days.”

Howard chimed in, “That is why I am here in major part. Thankfully, our unit’s second in command wanted to bring more members of the United Church into the squad. Captain’s Joland’s hatred of organized religion was overcome by her wife’s wisdom and the practical necessities of
Chuck pointed out, “As much as I might disagree with our Captain on some things, I do not doubt her firsthand experience and future potential. They say that she was the driving force behind the liberation of Eulidia. They also say that she is a uniquely gifted arcanist with an almost unparalleled mastery of fire.”

Haley added, “I assume that that has to do with her title of ‘Flamehawk?’ Regardless, now that introductions are out of the way, what are our orders, Sergeant?”

Chuck nodded and explained, “You really are a model soldier in the making, Private Haley. As for our orders, we believe that the nearby DRA units have been readying for an infantry push into our trenches. They will likely attack in great numbers with little warning. They will likely also have monstrous aid of some kind. Starting tomorrow, we will be deployed to the forward trenches to hold them against the enemy’s probable attack. Elisa, please show the new recruits to their tents for the night. Everyone, be ready to wake up bright and early tomorrow. For many of you, this will be your first battle of the war.”

Lily could not help but be quite nervous as she saluted Chuck. Lily knew that she would see how well her training would pay off tomorrow. Of course, that would only be the first battle she would have to survive. At least most of her new comrades were not focused on her past. She hoped that this unit would survive, just so that she and Haley could stay assigned to it.

Elisa then led Lily, Haley, Howard and Tala to their tents nearby Flamehawk Squadron’s command tent. The new recruits would want to get as much rest as possible before tomorrow.
The First Battle

The morning after meeting the rest of Sergeant Adams’ detachment, Haley and Lily were standing just outside of their tents wearing their full uniforms. Both women had put on their packs and gotten their weapons ready soon after waking up.

As the two Privates were waiting for their comrades to show up, Haley mentioned to Lily, “As I’m sure you are aware, this will be your first real time in combat.”

Lily interjected, “Trust me, I know. It was hard for me to sleep last night. Still, I am not going to desert. I remember Emily’s warnings. I told myself that I would get through this and see if I get into the academy. Besides, I told you that I would have your back and I meant it. You might be the only person in this world who would care if I died, Haley.”

Haley sighed and gave Lily a look that was hard to decipher, especially due to her reptilian face. She looked Lily in her eyes and told her sternly, “Just remember that we are going to be operating as a squad out there. We will all need to have each other’s backs when the real fighting breaks out.”

Lily just nodded back at Haley. She happened to notice a small bluebird flying over their position. There was not much grass in this dirty section of the Western Plains. There were also not that many trees. Lily wondered where the bird could have a nest in this war-torn region.

Realizing that she had spaced out to avoid thinking about the battle to come, Lily refocused on Haley. Her half-dragon friend surveyed the area and said, “I think I see our new comrades making their way over here. There seem to be multiple squads making their way towards the trenches as we speak.”

Sure enough, Lily saw Howard, Tala, Elisa and Chuck making their way towards them. Behind them were one human soldier, one dwarf soldier and the two feloid soldiers from yesterday. As Lily and Haley stood at attention, Chuck looked them over and said, “At ease. Captain Joland is leading the rest of the platoon to their assigned portion of the forward trenches. She has given me our assigned section. The Special Actions Platoons under Major Woodstock’s command will be holding the front most trenches. The Major wants the enemy to face our best troops on the frontlines. She does not want to hold us in reserve and sacrifice much of our regular infantry. I will admit to the logic in that plan. At this point in the war, we cannot afford to hold anything back.”

Howard pointed out, “We will have to see how much the DRA holds back. We should make a beeline for our assigned position and get set up there. The DRA forces have not attempted a dawn attack. Still, an enemy charge could come at any time.”

Haley saluted Chuck and Howard and replied, “Corporal Torrance makes a good point. We will follow you all.”

Chuck simply saluted Haley back as the two Privates fell into line and followed the others towards the trench lines. It was not long until the ten soldiers arrived at the front line of trenches. These lines had the occasional machine gun turret mounted. Just behind the trench line were a series of covered positions where a small number of heavier cannons were mounted. There were also a series of armored cover positions behind the trench line.

Elisa went prone behind one of the cover positions. She used the small gap between two
Elisa told Chuck, “I would suggest getting everyone set up and ready. I just got us an early warning system.”

Tala asked Elisa, “Are you actually some kind of druid?”

Elisa replied, “Nope. Still, I made friends with one when Clara and I were stationed in Agharta. Lila taught me a few tricks that have saved my life at least once. One of those tricks is how to connect with small animals. That bluebird should come flying back over to me if it sees the enemy advancing from their trenches.”

Chuck admitted, “That was pretty clever, Corporal. Now, I want everyone else to get their firearms out and ready. Set up along the trench and keep your eyes peeled. If you see a single thing that could indicate any incoming enemies, let us know! Howard, I want you behind the lines ready to heal any of our injured. Tala, Lily, get ready to raise your force shields at the first sight of the enemy. We only have one machine gun here, I want Privates Stoneaxe and Clifford on it.”

The two soldiers from before, one dwarf and one human, rushed over to get the machine gun loaded and ready. Howard stayed behind the others in the trench with his shield and revolver at the ready. Haley, Tala, Chuck and the two feloids readied their firearms. Lily kept one hand on her sidearm. She knew that when the enemy came, she was going to follow orders and project her force shield first. The detachment actually had a reasonably long section of trench to defend. The nearest other Terranoran Army unit was directly to the south and being led by Captain Joland.

Around an hour passed after the detachment arrived at their positions. Lily knew that their section of trench was not as well defended as it could be. They also had a total of only ten soldiers at the ready. At least they had a good variety of infantry units. Still, they did not know how many enemies they would be facing and when they would begin their charge.

Suddenly, Lily heard Kasha shouting, “The bird is back!”

Lily looked up and saw the bluebird quickly flying back over to perch on the metal barricade Elisa was taking cover behind.

The bird soon flew away as Lily focused herself on the open plains beyond the trenches. She saw what looked like a series of smokescreens going up. She was not sure if they were magical or mundane in nature.

Chuck called out, “Weapons free! Don’t let them past this line!”

Lily could now hear the sounds of gunfire beginning to erupt in the distance just to the south of them. Allied cannons began to open fire behind the trench. They were likely trying to dispel the smokescreen with the fiery blasts caused by the impact of the light artillery shells. As the open plains were lit up by the initial salvo of cannon fire, Lily could now see at least twenty humanoid shapes charging out from behind the smokescreens.

The DRA soldiers wore armored helmets that concealed their faces. Only a small eye slit allowed them to see out. Most of their armor was a bland light grey with varying degrees of plating.
Lily could see small flashes of green and red on their shoulders as they advanced with weapons drawn. The irony of the soldiers who served dragons wearing armor that imitated the look of knights was not lost on Lily.

As the DRA infantry continued to pour out from behind their, now evaporating, smokescreens, the machine gun nearby Lily began to fire. The mounted weapon send a stream of hot lead ripping into clusters of the advancing DRA troops. A lightly-armored enemy stopped charging and reached out a hand, which erupted into raging flames. However, he soon collapsed dead, blood erupting from his head, as a single loud gunshot rang out. Elisa called out, “I’ll keep an eye out for other arcanists! Hold back the grunts and keep your heads low.”

Lily and Tala each thrust out a hand and projected a series of hexagonal force panels around their bodies. The force shields formed up, as some of the DRA troops dropped to one knee, or dropped prone all together, and returned fire with their rifles and pistols. The DRA soldiers carrying metal shields did their best to stand in front of their comrades to cover them against the Terranoran fire.

As Haley began picking targets and opening fire with her semi-automatic rifle, Chuck saw an enemy dwarf advancing forward while carrying a portable machine gun. The light elf Sergeant hurled what looked like a small meteor into the slow-moving enemy. The armored dwarf took the hit and staggered back. Tala tossed an oversized dagger made of frozen ice into the dwarf’s head. The second spell sliced into the enemy’s head, killing him.

As the two feloids opened fire and Elisa continued to pick off enemies in the back of the advancing DRA formation, Lily saw an enemy soldier with a heavy shield and a semi-automatic pistol covering a rifleman behind her and moving towards the trench.

Lily swept her hand in front of her, sending a wave of sound into the shielded foe. This time, unlike her old street fighting days, she was holding nothing back. The sonic wave flew through to air and sliced into the enemy’s shield. The spell kept going, carving into the hostile soldier. Blood leaked out of the enemy’s helmet as she collapsed to the ground.

The enemy rifleman who had been hiding behind the shield bearer opened fire of Lily with his bolt-action rifle. However, her force shield deflected the shot that could have otherwise struck her shoulder.

Lily rapidly drew and sighted her pistol. Without much thought, she unloaded half a clip into the enemy soldier. He dropped from one bullet to the neck and two to the stomach.

Lily did not have much time to mentally process the fact that she had just killed two people. She looked over at Haley and saw her loading another clip into her rifle. The DRA troops were still coming. However, they were not making too much headway.

Suddenly, a shell from a Terranoran Army cannon landed in the middle of a trio of DRA troops. The explosive round tore the armored humanoids to smithereens.

A second bullet then bounced off of Lily’s force shield. However, the enemy who had fired it was down on one knee and taking aim again. Lily raised a hand a sent a sphere of pulsating sound flying at her assailant. The sphere of sonic energy tore into the man’s stomach, killing him and leaving a massive hole in his abdomen in the process.

Lily then saw a bullet narrowly miss Haley. She looked up and saw a pair of DRA soldiers taking aim at her friend. Lily conjured up one of the most basic offensive spells she knew. A barrage of small fireworks composed of pure force sprung from her hand and came crashing down on the two
DRA soldiers.

As the machine gun kept firing, Lily saw that the line was holding for now. Haley dropped a second machine-gun toting dwarf by unloading an entire eight-shot clip into him. Elisa was methodically picking off any enemies that looked like spellcasters. In the process, she was preventing them from taking out the detachment’s machine gun.

The DRA infantry were no longer getting reinforced at this point. The detachment’s machine gun was raking through them like a hot knife through butter. Even shielded foes were unable to withstand the barrage of bullets for long.

Chuck blasted an enemy shotgunner to the ground with another flaming meteor and called out, “They are almost out of reinforcements!”

Haley reloaded her rifle as Lily decided to duck for cover and reload her pistol. She also thrust out her hand and conjured a new force shield to replace her weakened initial one. As Lily was standing back up to peer out at the battlefield again. She heard a series of piercing howls.

Howard, who had been standing next to Tala and taking potshots with his revolver called out, “Incoming vargs!”

Lily saw at least six human-sized, wolf-like, quadrupeds with brown-black fur and red eyes charging the trenches at full speed. She fired a sound wave into one of them as it closed in on her. The creatures front two limbs were sliced off at the knee. Lily finished the beast with two shots from her pistol.

As Lily was thinking about how well her training had paid off, she heard a brutal shriek coming from above the detachment. She then heard Elisa call out, “Wyvern!”

As the remaining Varg and DRA soldiers rushed the trench, a tan-feathered draconic avian with a sharp blade on the end of its tail and a fearsome maw came crashing down on the detachments’ machine gun turret. Stoneaxe and Clifford were rapidly being mauled by the winged monster.

Howard readied his warhammer and shield and charged the wyvern. Tala blasted the beast with a sphere of chilled wind, slowing down its movement. Chuck readied his spiked chain and ordered, “Kasha, Morasha, Elisa, kill the remaining enemy infantry! Haley, Lily take out the vargs!”

Chuck then followed Howard towards the attacking wyvern. The creature had already torn the machine gun to pieces and had bitten the head off of Private Stoneaxe.

Howard charged up his warhammer with purple fire and smacked the wyvern in one leg. When the beats recoiled back, Tala shot it with her rifle. Howard used the opportunity to heal Private Clifford from the brink of death with a pulse of purple light and stand bravely over him.

Chuck charged past Howard and his spiked chain crackled with lightning. He swung his weapon at the wyvern’s head. The chain connected and the lightning it channeled nearly slew the draconic beast.

As Howard and Chuck were trying to kill the Wyvern with Tala supporting them from behind, Haley gunned down a varg. Lily saw the feloid soldiers Kasha and Morasha each dispatch an incoming DRA soldier with their firearms.

Elisa sniped one last dwarven machine gunner in the head and shouted, “We still have vargs closing in!”
Lily saw one varg have the misfortune to be blown to bits by a cannon shell landing just behind it. As she chuckled, she saw one varg zig-zagging its way closer to her. Before Lily could react, the creature leapt at her. However, her force shield stopped its teeth and claws from harming her. Unfortunately, Lily was now pinned under the canine monster.

Lily saw the varg snarl and bite away at her force shield. Another of the beasts jumped at Haley. However, the half-dragoness caught the creature and savagely bit its jugular with own fangs.

After Haley tossed the slain varg aside, another of the beasts jumped down into the trench and was about to charge Tala. Haley drew her two kukris and tackled the monster, hacking into it repeatedly until it was dead.

Lily could not force the varg that had tackled her off of her body. Her force shield was wearing thin now. One more bite would likely shatter it and the varg was not likely to stop then. Haley was attacked by one more varg. However, she seemed easily capable of killing the monster.

The wyvern’s tail shot out at Howard. However, he blocked it with his shield. Then, chuck charged his spiked chain with fire and swung it right for the wyvern’s chest. The beast’s hide was sliced open and its heart was set alight.

As the wyvern collapsed, Tala turned around to see Haley fighting one varg and one of them about to kill Lily. She took aim with her rifle, readied a shot and nailed the monster about to tear Lily’s throat out with one bullet between the eyes. The varg was slain by the single round.

Haley dodged the final varg’s attempt to pounce on her and used one of her kukris to slice the creature’s throat in one fluid motion. Kasha, Morasha and Elisa gunned down the final few DRA troops, who had begun a full retreat back to their lines.

Haley walked over to Lily. She did her best to spit the varg blood out of her mouth. She then helped haul the carcass off of Lily and said, “Sorry that I did not get that one. Too many of those things were attacking me. Fortunately, Tala was here.”

Lily just nodded. She saw that other than Private Stoneaxe, their detachment had taken no permanent losses in the defense of the trench line.

Elisa called out, “I don’t see any more enemies for now. Sergeant, you should get on the radio and ask Captain Joland how things are going in her section.”

Chuck nodded and said, “I will do just that. Good job, everyone. We lost our machine gun and one soldier. However, we held the line and not a single enemy who attacked our section survived. Let’s just hope that our comrades did as well as we did.”

Tala reloaded her rifle and asked Lily, “Are you ok? That damned varg nearly killed you!”

Lily walked up to Tala, shaking a bit. She then surprised even herself by embracing the deep elf. Lily told Tala, “You saved my life! …Thank you.”

Tala simply patted Lily on the back and told her, “I would hope that you would have done the same thing had our places been reversed.”

Lily just nodded, saying, “Of course, I won’t forget this.” Lily was internally surprised at how much emotion was pouring out of her. Surviving her first battle had made her realize what Haley had meant when she said the squad members all needed to have each other’s backs.

As Chuck got on the detachment’s radio to contact their Captain, Elisa kept scanning the plains for
enemies. The soldiers still had a job to do, the trenches needed to hold if the DRA forces were to be pushed back anytime soon.
Clearing a Path

Soon after the successful defense of the detachment’s section of trench line, Chuck got on the unit’s radio and contacted Flamehawk Squadron’s main force. The detachment soon learned that their main force had also withstood a massed DRA attack. The enemy charge had been led by a forest dragon that Captain Joland had finished off with a massive inferno burst. Chuck was able to confirm that the detachment was still under orders to hold their stretch of trench until that evening. Then, they would be relieved by a unit of regular army soldiers.

For most of the rest of the day, the detachment held their position. Thankfully, they seemed to have exhausted the DRA’s reserves in the area. At minimum, they had made it so that the enemy did not have the manpower to risk another charge on the area they were defending.

Haley had apologized to Lily for not being available to force the varg that had nearly killed her off of her. Lily had been understanding. She knew that Haley had been trying to fend off a series of vargs that had been attacking her. Lily had only slain one of the canine monsters, while Haley had killed three of the beasts.

The detachment had done their best to clear away the monster corpses left in their trench after the battle. They also had to deal with the headless corpse of Private Stoneaxe. The body of the wyvern took quite a bit of effort to move at all. They would likely have to wait for help to do anything about that body. Having grown up in the poorest quarters of Agharta, Lily was used to bad smells. The rest of the detachment had varying reactions to the corpses of their slain foes. As for the remains of the humanoid DRA infantry, they were all strewn across the blasted plain to the west of the trench. To the detachment’s credit, not a single enemy soldier had made it to their trench.

That evening, the relieving unit arrived to take command of the trench. A cleanup crew consisting of goblins and kobolds directed by an orc Sergeant arrived to ensure that as many of the bodies were properly and safely disposed of as possible.

Lily followed Haley back to their tents as the sun got lower in the sky. Sergeant Adams told his subordinates that they had done well their first time in battle together. However, the next day they would likely receive new orders. The fight for the Western Plains was far from over.

The next morning, Lily and Haley were standing outside of their tents once again. Both of them were wearing their uniforms and had their equipment ready. It was obvious to the two of them that their allies had held the trench lines and prevented the DRA from advancing past them to the Terranoran Army’s encampment.

Haley mentioned, as the two Privates were awaiting the arrival of their squadmates, “It took me all night to get the taste of varg out of my mouth. I was honestly acting on instinct when I bit that thing’s throat.”

Lily admitted, “I am just glad to be alive after all of that. I have to admit that my training certainly came in handy. I took out at least six enemies, including one varg.”

Haley gave Lily a toothy smile and replied, “I like to think that the two of us have proven that we deserve to be in our Special Actions Platoon. I am just glad that the lines held. This means that we might have a chance to start pushing the DRA west. I heard earlier that there is a city not far to the northwest of here. I can only assume that the higher ups are thinking about retaking it soon.”
Lily just shrugged her shoulders, she did not know what their commanders were planning to do now that the DRA’s offensive had been held back for the time being.

Lily then gave a salute as she saw Elisa and Tala making their way over to them. Haley did the same thing.

Elisa returned the two Privates’ salutes and told them, “Sergeant Adams has instructed me to bring you two to over to our platoon’s command tent. Captain Joland has new orders for us.”

Tala added, “It sounds like we are going to counterattack the DRA. If this works, it will be a big boost to our forces’ morale.”

Haley replied, “We would have to cross the plains to the enemy trenches in order to pull that off. We will have to see what orders our Captain has for us.”

Lily and Haley followed Elisa and Tala to Flamehawk Squadron’s briefing tent. There, they met up with Howard and Chuck. The feloid recon soldiers Kasha and Morasha were also present. At least ten other soldiers were standing in the large tent. Captain Joland and Lieutenant Carlton were standing behind the war table.

Elena saw the last of the soldiers under her command trickle in. Juliana then called the soldiers to attention. Once everyone was focused on the two officers, Elena began, “Yesterday, our forces managed to stop the DRA from breaching our lines. However, they still have more reinforcements on the way, possibly including artillery. We need to act fast in order to stop the enemy from having another chance at breaking through our lines. Major Woodstock has decided to mount an offensive against the enemy’s trenches while they are still recovering from yesterday’s battle. Our artillery will bombard the enemy’s trenches to soften them up for our offensive. I will be taking most of our platoon’s troops for the full-frontal assault targeting the enemy’s base camp. Cerberus II and the elites of the Northern Expeditionary force will be coming with us. We hope to eliminate the enemy’s main force and cut off their communications. If we can take the enemy base camp, the DRA will likely fall back, making Buraso safer and shifting the frontlines west.”

Juliana added, “Sergeant Adams, your detachment performed admirably yesterday. While Private Clifford will be staying behind as part of our reserves, you will be leading the rest of your soldiers across the plains independent of our main force. Your target will be the enemy’s northern battery of anti-aircraft cannons.”

Elena explained, “These AA guns are making it very difficult for our air support to come in. Reports indicate that a pair of DRA airships are headed our way from the west. If you can destroy or capture the AA battery, Specter and Polaris Squadrons will be able to escort the bombers of Tempest Squadron forward to destroy the airships. We need those airships to fall out of the sky as soon as possible. They could mess up this whole counteroffensive if they get close enough to accurately bombard our main force from the sky.”

Chuck saluted Elena and Juliana and told them, “I can only assume that my big sister volunteered me for this mission. Still, I have no intention of letting any of you down. We will take out those AA guns and make sure that our aero squadrons can pass!”

Elena smiled at Chuck and told him, “With any luck, the main charge will distract most of the enemy troops. We have located the spot where there should be the least distance between our lines and the enemy’s. You will be advancing from there. As for your target’s, the AA gun battery is positioned above ground. It should be visible in the distance when you are advancing across the plains. You will head west through the enemy trenches once you enter them. You will likely have to expose your selves in order to take out the gunnery crews. I would strongly suggest waiting until
our artillery units stop firing and then charge while the enemy is recovering from the shelling.”

Chuck nodded and told Elena, “We will not let you down, ma’am! I will get our squad radio ready so that we can contact our air units once the enemy battery is dealt with.”

Lily was nervous about this mission. This time, her squad would be advancing across the open plains and confronting the DRA in their own trenches. At the same time, she was impressed that her squad had been given such an important mission. Presumably, another unit was targeting another enemy AA battery, seeing as though Juliana had referred to the detachment’s target as the “northern battery.” Still, it seemed like a lot was potentially hanging on their success. Lily looked over at Haley who was silent, but seemed as determined as ever.

Chuck led his detachment out of the command tent, as Elena and Juliana began to lead the rest of Flamehawk Squadron to meet up with Major Woodstock’s force.

After picking up the detachment’s radio set, Lily and the others followed Chuck to a section of trench line they were not familiar with. They kept their heads down as the enemy frontlines were within the range of the naked eye. Soon, the sound of heavy artillery opening fire behind the Terranoran Army’s trenches could be heard. Artillery shells came crashing down all around the DRA lines moments later. Explosions of fire and shrapnel erupted as the explosive shells rained down. Lily knew that she and her allies were fortunate that the DRA units in the area had not yet been able to move their heavy artillery into position. If the main Terranoran force took the DRA base camp, hopefully that would never come to pass.

After a few minutes, the bombardment of the DRA lines slowed down and then stopped. Chuck took his position at the head of his detachment and shouted, “All units forward! Remember our objective!”

With Chuck and Howard in the lead, the eight-person detachment climbed out of their trenches and began to rapidly advance towards the enemy frontline. Lily, Tala and Elisa brought up the rear of the unit with Haley, Kasha and Morasha in between.

It did not take long for the eight soldiers to close in on the enemy trench. Unfortunately, the small number of DRA soldiers defending the trench section were standing ready. Lily and Tala projected their force shields and everyone else in the detachment drew their weapons.

Elisa called out, as enemy bullets began to fly past the detachment, “I see three machine guns! We should be in their range soon!”

Chuck simply nodded at Howard as the detachment members saw the DRA troops preparing a trio of mounted machine guns to fire on the attackers. Howards pointed his hammer at the turret to his right and sent a ray of purple light streaking towards it. The beam sliced into the mounted weapon, damaging it enough to prevent it from firing.

Chuck hurled one of his flaming meteors at the turret on the left. The projectile smashed and charred the front of the weapon, rendering it unusable.

The central machine gun opened fire on the detachment. However, before it could land any solid hits, Elisa rapidly dispatched its gunner with a single bullet through his helmet visor.

As Kasha and Morasha opened fire on the enemy troops in the trench, Haley fell back slightly and told Lily and Tala, “I think I can draw their fire, but I need to get into that trench!”

Lily knew exactly what to do. As a bullet bounced off of her force shield, she gave Haley a
quick pat on the shoulder. The half-dragon woman began to move much faster than usual. Tala then put a hand on Haley’s should and snapped her fingers on her other hand. Haley suddenly disappeared from view when Tala cast her spell.

Howard and Chuck were now nearing the enemy trench. Three enemy soldiers had been felled by fire from the detachment. However, there were still another six at least defending the position. One of them was trying to mount the remaining usable machine gun after clearing away the dead body of her slain comrade.

Suddenly Haley reappeared inside the DRA trench. She was wielding her kukris, one of which she had used to slice into the back of the DRA soldier trying to mount the machine gun.

The DRA troops quickly realized that one of their enemies had made it into their trench. Haley reacted quickly and took a deep breath. She then expelled a gout of fire that roasted the three DRA troops to the left of the charging detachment.

Two of the surviving DRA soldiers moved in to engage Haley. Lily saw an armored DRA trooper lifting a greatsword above his head. He was about to bring it crashing down on Haley, who was being distracted by another enemy coming right for her with her sword and shield drawn.

As Haley engaged the faster DRA soldier, she was unable to react to the heavy soldier bearing down on her. However, Lily was. She shouted, “Oh no you don’t!” She rapidly flung a large vibrating ball of sonic energy directly into the greatsword wielder’s helmeted head. The sphere of sound almost instantaneously rendered the imposing foe a headless corpse.

The final few DRA soldiers in the trench section began to panic. Tala blasted one enemy with a ray on intense cold, while Elisa took down the one fighting Haley with a single precise headshot from her sniper rifle. The one final enemy was gunned down by Kasha and Morasha before she could flee.

The Terranoran soldiers made it into the trench. They could hear the sounds of pitched battle in the distance. Their allies counter attack on the DRA base camp was likely beginning.

Elisa readied her combat shotgun as Chuck told Haley, Lily and Tala, “That was impressive work. You took a real risk, Private Haley. Still, it paid off in spades. As for the other two of you, that was good, solid, intelligent use of your magic. Not every well-used spell has to harm an enemy directly or heal one of us. Now, we are to head due west through these trenches until we reach the enemy Anti-Aircraft guns. My big sister is counting on us and so is Captain Joland.”

Chuck drew his spiked chain and took the lead with Howard as the detachment rushed towards the AA battery. As the eight soldiers got going, Haley told Lily, “Thanks for downing that one hostile. I guess you really do have my back.”

Lily nodded back at Haley and told her, “Any time. You were honestly heroic the way you drew their attacks. We could have been in trouble if they had gotten the time to line up some good shots.”

Elisa mentioned, “Most of these enemies are really green. They are not very well trained or equipped. Their armor looks thick, but it is easily penetrated. They are also mostly bad marksmen and women. Honestly, their helmets probably make their aim even worse.”

Tala suggested, “It seems like the DRA’s commanders really do not put much value on the lives of their individual soldiers. They care more about overwhelming their opponents through numbers and monstrous support than training their infantry well.”
Suddenly, the detachment rounded a bend and saw four DRA soldiers looking somewhat surprised. Chuck charged in, electrified his spiked chain and raked it across the front two enemies. Howard charged in and brought down his warhammer on the third one’s head.

Lily got a bead on the final enemy and unloaded a few shots from her pistol. Like Elisa had said, the DRA soldier’s light armor was not that protective. The enemy recon soldier collapsed with three bullet holes in her chest.

As Lily instinctively reloaded her sidearm, Elisa saw two DRA soldiers with shotguns charging in from a trench to the side. She dashed in just behind Chuck and Howard and discharged her own shotgun to perforate both of them in one blast.

Elisa pumped her shotgun as Tala and Haley gave her impressed looks. Elisa had been in the army since before the war began. Her experience was certainly showing here.

Not pausing for long, Chuck and Howard led their force deeper into the enemy trenches. They only paused briefly to eliminate scattered enemy soldiers. Most of the DRA troops in the area were likely being sent to try and repel the main force’s assault. Most of the enemies the detachment encountered were heading in the general direction of their base camp.

It was not long until the detachment reached a dirt ramp leading up and out of the trench network. Lily could see the tops of multiple single-barreled, upward-pointed, mounted gun turrets. They seemed to have reached the AA battery.

Chuck shouted, “Force shields up, weapons out! We are taking this battery down!”

Chuck led his troops up the dirt ramp at a full charge. Lily saw a few scattered DRA infantry soldiers standing guard over five of the anti-aircraft turrets. There was not much cover in this area. The AA guns were being manned by soldiers who appeared to be DRA combat engineers. Their armor was light and they were carrying various specialized gear in a variety of leather pouches.

The six or so DRA soldiers guarding the AA guns saw Chuck advancing. However, the two closest among them were injured and stunned by a blast of sound and purple lighting that Howard had summoned at their feet.

Haley and Morasha finished the two stunned enemies with gunfire from their rifles. Two of the enemy soldiers held back and drew their rifles as the other two drew steel battleaxes and shields. Lily sent a soundwave flying into one of the riflemen, knocking him away back into a nearby trench to his death. After a bullet bounced off of her force shield, Tala, threw a frozen dagger into the stomach of the second rifleman in retaliation.

As the two axe-wielding soldiers closed in on Chuck, the blademage chuckled and sent out a wave of fire to cook the pair of grunts in their armor.

As the five DRA combat engineers dismounted their turrets and tried to draw their firearms, Howard advanced and breathed his own blast of fire out onto two of the turrets, melting them and killing their gunners.

Elisa took out another enemy with her sniper rifle and Kasha unload bullets from her dual semi-automatic pistols into the penultimate foe.

The last DRA engineer pulled out a grenade. However, Lily clapped her hands, causing a minor blast of sound to erupt right in front of him. The stunned soldier dropped his grenade. The explosive device went off, impaling him with shrapnel and rendering his AA turret inoperable.
As the detachment soldiers were about to breathe sighs of relief, they heard a crackling noise coming out of the sky. Kasha and Morasha both rapidly threw themselves to the ground to evade a lightning bolt that flew out of the sky. Tala’s force shield was shattered by the bolt and she staggered back, temporarily blinded by the flash of electricity, but physically unharmed.

A deep blue-scaled dragon was diving towards the detachment. The airborne reptile held out its claws and projected a sphere of lighting at Chuck as it continued its dive.

Chuck took the hit and fell to one knee. As Howard rushed over to heal him, he ordered, “Focus your fire on that dragon! We cannot let the DRA regain use of the two undamaged turrets!”

Lily flung a sphere of sound into the dragon as Haley, Morasha, Kasha and Elisa reloaded their firearms and prepared to open fire on the scaled flyer.

Lily saw the dragon coming in hot, she then realized that Tala was likely within reach of where the creature was going to land. She rushed forward and tackled the deep elf out of the way as the dragon landed and tried to maul Howard and the just-healed Chuck.

Lily and Tala found themselves on the ground together. The dragon was staggered and prevented from unleashing its full barrage of melee attacks by the storm of bullets sent its way by Haley, Elisa, Kasha and Morasha.

Lily thought, “What did I just do? I guess that I was trying to make Tala and I even?” She then quickly got up and saw the rest of her unit fighting the desert dragon.

Tala smiled at Lily, quickly got up and sent a wave of frozen air at the dragon. The creature was slowed by the frozen wave, which gave Howard the chance to ignite his warhammer’s head with purple fire. He then struck the dragon’s lower jaw, knocking his head into an upward facing position.

Chuck fired a point-blank beam of fire into the dragon’s neck. As Haley, Kasha and Morasha did their best to reload quickly, Elisa, who had readied her sniper rifle to fire again, ran around the fight and got down on one knee. As the dragon lowered its head and prepared to breathe a second bolt of lightning, Elisa fired a single bullet into the wounded reptile’s eye that was facing her.

The desert dragon suddenly stopped breathing, the bullet having likely penetrated his brain. The creature slumped forward, dead.

Chuck wasted no time in barking out orders as he got the detachment’s radio system ready for transmission. He shouted, “Everyone form a perimeter in case more enemies show up! Force shields up, guns reloaded and out!”

Lily looked up and saw a pair of light green and grey airships in the distance slowly descending towards the battlefield. There were about ten single-engine biplanes with similar coloration flying around them as escorts.

Haley said, “I hope that our aero squadrons’ holding pattern is not too far away.” She was using her binoculars to get a better look at the hostile airships.

Lily readied her pistol after conjuring up a fresh force shield. She heard Chuck saying, “Specter Leader, this is Flamehawk 2. Come in Specter Leader.”

A female voice crackled over the radio, replying, “This is Specter Leader. It’s good to hear your voice little bro. We have just heard that the southern AA battery has been cleared out by the
11th Special Actions Platoon. What is your situation down there?”

Chuck simply smiled and responded, “The northern AA battery is out of commission. Selina, you are clear to begin your approach.”

Lily heard Selina saying, “Copy that, I will inform my unit and Polaris and Tempest Squadrons and we will be right there. Stay safe down there, Chuck.”

Chuck responded, “Copy that. Good luck up there.”

As Chuck got off of the radio, Lily hoped that their air support would arrive soon. The enemy aircraft were slowly closing in on the ground battle.
Advancing the Frontlines

The detachment had done their best to create a defensive perimeter around the remaining two operational anti-aircraft guns. The pair of light green and grey DRA airships in the distance were slowly descending towards the battlefield. When Lily looked to the south, she saw occasional explosions and could make out soldiers fighting in and around a large series of tents. It looked like the main force had made its way past the enemy trenches and was trying to claim their base camp.

Haley was looking up into the sky with the aid of her modified binoculars. She suddenly smiled and called out, “I see our air support coming in!”

Lily and the others all briefly looked up into the sky where they saw around thirty dark blue biplanes rapidly flying towards the DRA airships and their fighter escorts. They were grouped into two units of fifteen planes. These aircraft had a single pusher propeller just behind their wings and twin machine guns mounted just in front of their cockpits. Flying just behind the two fighter squadrons was a unit of fifteen larger aircraft with the same coloration. These biplanes had two forward-facing propellers, one nestled on each side of the fuselage. One machine gun turret sat in front of the main cockpit and one sat behind the main cockpit. All forty-five airplanes featured the white unicorn emblem of the Domain of Terranor on their wings and fuselages.

Soon the two fighter squadrons split up. One went directly for the airships, targeting the zeppelins’ mounted gun turrets. The second squadron went after enemy’s fighters. The bombers slowly began their approach, climbing steadily and gaining altitude in the process.

Chuck smiled and told his squadmates, “Our two best squadrons of F-1 Bluejays and our best squadron of B-1 Stingrays. The aeronautics subsidiary of Vargas Technologies has only been producing these planes for the last two years. Still, their deployment has been integral to holding back the enemy on this front.”

The Terranoran pilots of Polaris Squadron began to make short work of the DRA airplanes, which Chuck referred to as “Manticore Class” fighters. Specter Squadron’s veteran flyers used their machine guns to strafe the machine guns mounted on pods attached to the airship’s bodies. There were also a couple of mounted heavy cannons on the airships, which were made a higher priority as the bombers continued to close in and gain altitude.

Elisa mentioned, as no DRA reinforcements had yet appeared to challenge the detachment on the ground, “I have heard that most of our military airships have either been deployed to the Southern Front, or are patrolling the skies around Agharta.”

Haley just chuckled and added, “I just find it hilarious that VT named their bomber line ‘Stingrays.’ Those animals are actually pretty harmless and quite friendly if offered food. They are practically the dogs of the ocean. You just have to be careful of their stingers.”

Lily asked Chuck, “Sir, the bombers are gaining altitude, they are now almost above the enemy airships… are they going to…”

Chuck explained, “Bomb them from above, yes. The bombs that they are loaded up with are designed to break through the airships’ upper hulls and explode inside of the superstructure. This strategy has been one of the ways that we have kept the DRA from using their airship fleet to fly right over our defenses and overwhelm our positions across all fronts. If fighters can take out the guns on top of the airship, the bombers can fly right over them unimpeded and destroy them.”
Elisa, who had been observing the air battle through her sniper rifle’s scope, announced, “The DRA fighters are down. It looks like most of the airships turrets have also been destroyed. Tempest squadron is flying above the airships now....”

Suddenly, one of the DRA airships began to erupt with plumes of fire. The flying behemoth began to fall out of the sky towards the barren plains. The second airship was wrecked by explosions and began to follow its partner in falling towards the ground. The Terranoran aero squadrons turned back and then began to fly back towards their airfield behind the trenches. Their mission had been completed. The enemy airships and their fighter escorts had been destroyed, preventing the DRA forces on the ground from receiving air support.

Soon after the two burnt husks of the DRA zeppelins crashed into the barren plains still a good distance from the detachment’s position, the radio began to crackle. Chuck got on it and the entire detachment heard Juliana’s voice saying, “Flamehawk 2, report in. We just saw the enemy’s airships going down. What is your unit’s status?”

Chuck replied, “We have seized the AA battery, Flamehawk 1. We are holding position there now. What is your status?”

Juliana said, “We have captured the enemy base camp and their forces are in full retreat. They are likely falling back to the city of Ouktai to the northwest of here. The DRA troops in your vicinity should be falling back now. You have permission to regroup with us at the base camp to the south of your position. If there are any intact, or lightly damaged, enemy AA guns left, you are to leave them as is for now.”

Chuck responded, “Yes ma’am. We will see you soon. Over and out Flamehawk 1.”

As the detachment began to head down into the trenches and head south to the recently-seized base camp, Howard mentioned to Lily, “I must say, when I first learned that you a criminal, I was highly suspicious of you. Still, seeing the way that you tackled Tala to safety was quite reassuring regarding your character.”

Lily simply replied, “...Thank you, sir?”

Tala gave Howard one of her harmless “punches” and added, “I think that he is trying to say thank you for getting me out of harm’s way.”

Lily just nodded as Haley pointed out, “We did not lose any soldiers this time. More importantly, I think that we may have just taken part in the first major Terranoran victory of this war.”

Elisa added, “The next step in building our momentum will probably be taking the city of Ouktai. If our allies to the south can hold the DRA back while we retake that city, it would go a long way towards pushing the invaders out of Western Terranor.”

Chuck sighed and said, “What worries me more is that the DRA continues to make headway in the continental south. They are continuing to overwhelm more and more of Ruvia. I fear that even if we stop their Western Offensive, they could reach Agharta by invading across the Southern Plains. Still, we have done an excellent job today. With the DRA base camp captured, we will need to move up our troops protecting Buraso to make sure that our southern flank is well defended while we try to capture Ouktai.”

Howard said, “I would hope that we can leave that to the higher ups. They will find out how to advance our lines. I just hope that we can liberate Ouktai soon. I hate to think of how our
Lily was content to let the higher ups plan their next move. She was also admittedly proud of the work that her unit had done that day. They had been given a critical assignment and had pulled it off without any losses.

The detachment reached the captured DRA base camp without any losses. They saw the bodies of enemy soldiers strewn about the encampment. Along with the humanoid corpses were dead vargs, two wyverns and a forest dragon. The Special Actions Platoons really were the elites of the Terranoran Army, considering all that they had accomplished in such a short span of time with so few losses. For once, Lily felt something in herself that she was not used to feeling. It was pride. Pride that she had been selected to be in such a unit and that she had proven herself worthy of the assignment so far. Of course, Haley had easily earned her place in Flamehawk Squadron. Lily had never doubted that.

The detachment soon linked up with the rest of Flamehawk Squadron just outside of a large dark-brown tent. Elena looked over the detachment and told them, “You all performed quite admirably today. For the time being, our orders are to help fortify this position to fend off any possible enemy counterattacks. Soldiers from our trench lines are advancing as we speak now that we have cleared the path for them. We will maintain this position for the time being. I expect that we will try to liberate the city of Ouktai within the next week. For now, I will leave Juliana in command here. Major Woodstock wants to meet with all of the platoon leaders under her command to plan our next series of moves.”

As Elena departed, Lily noticed Lieutenant Ruby Benson and her older brother Captain James Benson talking not too far away. She remembered that Sergeant Emily Falchum, the woman who had taught her how to properly use her pistol, was in their unit.

Juliana looked over the soldiers of Flamehawk Squadron and ordered, “For the time being, we are going to split up into groups to help cleanup operations and ready defenses around this encampment. We do not want the enemy to recapture this position and set us back to when we were on the defensive.”

Lily and most of her squadmates were sent to patrol the outer perimeter of the encampment to watch for any DRA reinforcements trying to make a quick counterattack. It seemed like the initial offensive that Major Woodstock had led had taken the DRA by surprise and dealt a devastating blow to their presence in the area. After their failed attempt to storm the Terranoran Army’s lines the day before, the DRA forces had been unprepared to face a counterattack primarily composed of veteran soldiers.

Over the next three days, the Terranoran forces consolidated their position. Backed up by their allied ground forces to the south and their air support units, Major Woodstock’s forces had fortified their position and been reinforced significantly. The economic engines of the Domain of Terranor were starting to pump out enough war material to equip the successive waves of soldiers arriving at the frontlines. Still, the DRA forces were formidable opponents and the tide had not yet turned sufficiently, especially in Ruvia. Rather than attempt to retake the camp that Major Woodstock’s troops had captured, the DRA were holding their position at Ouktai and waiting for the Terranorans to come to them.

Ouktai, which was a major mining and industrial city for Western Terranor, was now within reach of being liberated by the Domain’s forces. The city was one of the farthest northeast positions captured by the DRA units on the Western front. Taking the city would both deny the DRA its natural resources and hopefully allow the Terranoran Army to begin outflanking the
Lily, Haley and Tala were walking together in full uniform the evening three days after the capture of the DRA base camp. The trio of Privates were on patrol just to the Northwest of their force’s encampment. They could see the lights of the city of Ouktai not all that far away. The city was less than half a day’s march from the bulge in the Terranoran lines. Haley, despite being the same rank as Lily and Tala, had been assigned to be the patrol leader by Chuck. Her brave actions in the last battle had impressed the higher ups of Flamehawk Squadron.

The three women kept their eyes open. Lily had better vision than a human due to her light elven blood. However, Haley and Tala both had her beat due to Haley’s draconic ancestry and Tala being a deep elf. Suddenly, the trio heard the sound of a truck driving their way. Thankfully, it was coming from their side’s lines.

A Terranoran Army transport truck that had been painted black drove up to the patrolling trio. A pair of female human soldiers got out of the back and approached the three Privates.

Lily squinted and recognized one of the two women as Emily Falchum. However, Emily was wearing a jet-black suit of light armor with no military emblems this time. She was still carrying her usual assortment of blades and firearms. The other young woman was wearing the same armor and had her own pair of short swords sheathed at her belt. She also had a pair of semi-automatic pistols, the make of which Lily did not recognize, at her belt. The other young woman looked around Emily’s height. The only odd thing about her was that her long, straight, hair was silver in color despite her relative youth.

The three Privates saluted the black-armored duo. Emily looked them over and told them, “At ease. We are looking for volunteers for a special assignment. It will require stealth, at least initially. Are any of you three interested?”

Lily admitted, “Most of my magic uses sound, so I don’t think I will be much help if stealth is what you are after.”

Haley said, “I am in. I have done a reasonable amount of sneaking in my time.”

Tala thought for a moment and then suggested, “I might not be the best at stealth. Still, most of my spells use cold magic, which creates little sound and no light. I could see myself being useful.”

The silver-haired soldier told Emily, “We do have an unarmored stealth suit. An arcanist could come in handy if or when a real fight breaks out.”

Emily nodded and explained, “This is my friend Alicia Forrester. She is a mercenary attached to the Northern Expeditionary Force who is serving in the 15th Special Actions Platoon. We are planning to lead a very small team in to engage in sabotage before the upcoming liberation of Ouktai.”

Alicia added, “Lieutenant Benson is to lead a small recovery team to back us up from a distance. This truck should be able to carry eight people in total. If the two of us, the half-dragon and the deep elf make up the main team and we have our two snipers and Ruby in the recovery team…”

Lily raised her hand and volunteered, “If Haley and Tala are going on this mission, then I volunteer for the recovery team. I at least think I can stay hidden at a distance.” Lily would have preferred to finish the patrol and get some rest. However, if her friends were going to endanger
themselves, then the least Lily could do would be to try and have their backs.

Tala smiled at Lily. Emily then ordered, “Get in the truck you three. We will head back to base and pick up our equipment and our two snipers. We will then drive out as soon as we are ready.”

The three Privates all saluted Emily and then got into the back to the truck. The vehicle soon made its way back to the encampment. Lily was still wondering what she and her friends had just gotten themselves into during the ride back to the camp.
A Night Operation

Lily was waiting nearby the black painted truck in the middle of the Terranoran Army encampment that had been under DRA control only three days prior. Emily Falchum and her mercenary friend Alicia Forrester has gone off with Haley and Tala to get them equipped for the night mission they had volunteered for. Lily had decided to go with the small recovery team that would be hanging back with the truck while the infiltration team advanced on their target. Lily still did not know what the target was. Whatever it was, the Terranoran Army wanted it destroyed before they tried to liberate the city of Ouktai to the Northwest.

Lily saw Lieutenant Ruby Benson approaching her in her regular uniform. Behind her was Elisa Verite, also wearing her standard uniform and carrying her standard weaponry. Walking next to Elisa was a light-skinned and redheaded human man wearing black light armor that was outfitted with heavier plates than what Lily had seen so far. His only weapons were a large combat knife and a sniper rifle.

Lily instinctively saluted Ruby as the trio reached the truck. Ruby returned the salute and told Lily, “At ease, Private. I know that you have already met and fought alongside Corporal Verite. The man in the black armor is Cyril Forrester. He is a mercenary sniper working with the 15th Special Actions Platoon under the command of Lady Hitomi Winslow.”

Cyril nodded and explained, “You have likely already met my twin sister, Alicia. She will be going with the infiltration team under Sergeant Falchum’s command.”

Ruby explained, “As for our mission, the four of us are the recovery team. What that means is that we will be hanging back to provide support for the infiltration team. We will cover them if they find themselves forced to retreat, or pursued by the enemy after eliminating their targets. We are also to guard the truck while the infiltration team is away.”

Lily asked Ruby, “What is the infiltration team’s target, ma’am?”

Ruby replied, “An enemy artillery position they have set up in a mining camp less than an hour from Ouktai. The infiltration team is going to sneak into the camp under the cover of darkness and find a way to destroy the artillery. If we can take the big guns down, they won’t be able to fire on our troops and trucks as they advance on the city.”

Lily simply nodded as Elisa added, “Mr. Forrester and I will take up sniping positions and prepare to cover the infiltration team if need be. You and Lieutenant Benson will be with us to provide needed arcane support if we need to make a fighting retreat, covering the infiltration team if need be.”

Cyril pointed out, “We would have considered bringing more soldiers for this sabotage mission. However, mobility is key for such an operation. Also, infiltrations have a higher chance of success if less people are involved. More infiltrators mean that there is a higher chance of one of them being seen before their mission is complete.”

Soon, Lily noticed Emily and Alicia coming their way. Each of them had picked up a metal crossbow and a case of bolts for it. They were carrying the crossbows in addition to their normal weapons. Behind the two human women were Haley and Tala. Haley was now wearing the same stealth armor as Emily and Alicia. She had all of her usual weaponry and a crossbow with her. Tala was wearing a black outfit as well and carrying a crossbow. However, her stealth uniform had no visible armor plating on it. Lily was aware that only arcanists like Ruby who had drilled
A screaming voice spat, “Relentlessly for combat could cast their magic while wearing any significant amount of armor. Neither modern armor technology or magical enhancements had changed that reality.

Ruby saw that the eight-person team was ready and announced, “Alright, everyone in the truck. Sergeant Falchum, you will be up front with me. Everyone else will be in back.”

Ruby and Emily headed up to board the truck’s front cabin, while the others boarded the truck from the rear. Lily had noted that the truck’s headlights had been dimmed and that its engine was making less noise than one would expect. This particular truck had been modified for stealth operations. That much was obvious.

As the black truck sped off across the open plains towards mining camp, Lily and Haley were sitting next to each other. Tala and Alicia were sitting right behind the cabin and Elisa and Cyril were sitting opposite Lily and Haley. Haley looked over at Lily and said, “I appreciate you coming on this mission with us. Even though you knew that you would not be an asset to the infiltration team, you still wanted to help.”

Lily replied, “I was not about to let you and Tala head out without me. You two are about my only friends in the world right now….”

Tala smiled at Lily and told her, “I would say that we’re friends, Lily. We have talked quite a few times since we first met. Also, I saved you from that varg and you got me out of the way of that incoming dragon. So, we do look out for each other. Speaking of friends, I did not get the chance to tell Howard that I was heading out. I hope that we get back before next morning so that he is not too worried.”

Alicia chimed in, “Emily and I have worked together multiple times now. I have faith in her skill as an infiltrator and leader. You two should know that you are in good hands. As for me, I learned almost all that I know about stealth from my mother, who learned from our company’s founder. You two should just follow Emily and I’s leads.”

Tala nodded as Haley told Alicia, “I remember hearing about the War Tigers. I was told that you all were arguably the best mercenary company on Austean back when I was working as a private contractor.”

Alicia smiled and replied, “We certainly work hard to keep up our reputation. The armor you are currently wearing is a newer model of the stealth armor our founder, Captain Talia Fujiwhara designed back when she founded our company. Cyril and I’s mother was her apprentice. A decent portion of our company was hired to fight alongside Lady Hitomi Winslow’s Northern Expeditionary Force when the war broke out. That is why we are here now.”

Haley nodded and mentioned, “I heard that the War Tigers had strong ties to Bakaria and the House of Winslow. Someone once told me that Talia Fujiwhara has been living in Narvograd, the Bakarian capital city, for quite some time.”

Lily continued to listen as Alicia and Haley conversed. Elisa and Cyril were talking as well. It seemed like Cyril was trying to learn about both the tactics of Terranoran Army snipers and about Elisa as a person. Lily noted the way he was looking at her.

It was not long until the truck reached a position just behind a small ridge. Ruby parked the vehicle there and everyone got out. The small force was now quite close to the mining camp. The installation’s few lights could easily be made out at their current range.

Once everyone was out of the truck, Ruby ordered, “Sergeant Falchum will be taking
command of the infiltration team. You know your orders. Good luck out there.”

Emily led her team out onto the plains towards the mining camp after she and the others saluted Ruby. Haley and Tala smiled briefly over at Lily as they headed out. Lily noticed that Emily and Alicia each had two objects dangling from their belts. It was hard to make them out in the late evening light, however.

Ruby then looked over Elisa, Cyril and Lily and continued, “As for the four of us, our snipers will take up positions atop the ridge. You two are to observe the mining camp. Do not open fire unless it is obvious that the infiltration team has been detected and needs covering fire. Private Lily, you will be keeping watch over the truck and this area with me. Be ready for a fight just in case. Still, I hope that our infiltration team sneaks in undetected and then escapes in the chaos they plan to cause.”

Lily saluted Ruby. She hoped that Haley, Tala and the others would make it back safely. She knew that she was doing all that she could for her friends. Of course, like in any other military operation, there were real risks involved.

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Haley and Tala were walking in the direction of the mining camp turned artillery positon behind Emily and Alicia. Haley had noticed that Emily seemed quite close to the silver-haired mercenary. She wondered when the two women had met and how many of these sorts of forays they had gone on together.

Tala quietly asked Haley, “Sergeant Adams mentioned that you had landed in prison for assaulting some dwarves. I know that you were trying to help some people you thought were in need. I’m just wondering why you took it upon yourself?”

Haley replied, “It did not seem to me like the local police cared enough to stop the dwarves from engaging in harassment and persecution. I felt like somebody had to do something to help those light elves. Sadly, the authorities just treated what I did as unprovoked assault, since the dwarves had not been bothering me directly.”

Tala sighed and admitted, “My parents raised me to be wary of light elves. They always told me that they had tried to murder our whole race and that one day they could attempt such an atrocity again. The main reason that I was happy to be assigned to serve under Sergeant Adams is that he is a descendant of the Greatest Traitor. My family always revered the Cordwin/Coril bloodline as the ‘righteous light elves.’”

Haley sighed and told Tala, “Appearances can be deceiving. Look at me, some might dismiss me as monstrous. Still, I like to think that most people who get to know me end up with a decent opinion of me. You know that Lily is half-light elf and you still knowingly saved her from that varg. She also knocked you out of the way of that incoming desert dragon Elisa slew.”

Tala nodded. She then shrugged her shoulders and replied, “Maybe I need to be less judgmental? Howard always does his best to judge others based on their actions, not their appearances. I guess I should keep trying to follow his example.”

Haley smiled at Tala and mentioned, “To be fair to you, you were always defending Lily to him, at least implicitly. By the way, sorry if this is prying too much, but…”

Tala chuckled and preempted Haley by saying, “No, he is not my boyfriend. Maybe one day he will be though? I have noticed the way he looks at me on occasion. There is honestly nobody I
would trust more than him to be my lover. Still, we are at war now. I don’t think I want to become romantically involved while we are still going into battle.”

Haley just nodded and said, “I assume that you and Howard get asked if the two of you are a couple frequently?”

Tala nodded affirmatively, blushing slightly. She then asked Haley, “Speaking of romance, have you ever been with anyone? Lily came out to me after we took the DRA camp, she also told me more about her earlier life. It sounds like we had very different upbringings. I was wondering more about your childhood. Did you ever fall in love when you were younger?”

Haley put a hand on the back of her head. She did not want to say too much about her early life, since she had grown up on Dalugon. Whether or not Tala was aware of that fact, she did not want to remind her of it at the moment. She decided to address the deep elf girl’s other question. Haley replied, “Around three years ago, I had a brief romance with a slightly older girl named Amanda. It did not last long, but I still remember her fondly on occasion. She was the only person I have been with for more than just one night.”

Tala smiled at Haley and told her, “Not to judge you, but I have been waiting for the right person, if you catch my drift. Whether that is Howard, or some other guy, I am willing to wait. I have to confess that I have attracted a lot of attention in my time. Thankfully, Howard being around me kept my many admirers at bay. As for your story, I think Amanda is a really cute name. If I had a daughter, I would consider naming her Amanda.”

Haley nodded, thinking back to her brief first love. She wondered what had happened to Amanda, the daughter of a dock foreman and his wife, now that the DRA had almost certainly taken Scralville. As for Tala, she seemed to be a bit vain. She was also clearly prejudiced against light elves. However, Haley knew from experience that the young deep elf was brave, loyal and seemed good at heart. She just hoped that Tala’s lack of recon experience would not jeopardize their stealth operation.

Emily and Alicia continued to lead Haley and Tala across the plains closer to the mining camp. It would not be long now until the four-woman force closed in on their destination and would need to focus on remaining undetected.
Haley and Tala were following Emily and Alicia closer to the DRA occupied mining camp where the artillery battery they were to destroy was located. They could start to see a series of lights illuminating the encampment. The infiltration team could not yet see the DRA gun positions. However, they were currently looking for large objects to hide behind on their way closer to the camp.

As the four-woman formation neared their target destination, Tala pointed out, “I think I see a few large boulders over there. Maybe we could use them for cover?”

Haley looked over to three large spiky “lumps” sticking out of the ground. Her draconic vision allowed her to realize that there was something off about the “boulders.”

Tala rubbed her eyes and admitted, “Maybe not…”

Emily quickly explained, “I think that those are sleeping Ankylosaurs. I guess that those armored brutes do not seem to care much about there being a war on. They will keep grazing on whatever foliage they can find, even with big guns going off in their vicinity.”

Alicia pointed ahead and said, “I see a large cluster of shrubbery not far off our route. It should offer us a good cover position.”

Emily nodded and began to lead her small group over to the small cluster of foliage. Thankfully, the remaining local herbivores had not eaten up this patch of brush for the time being.

When the small squad arrived behind the bushes and took cover, Emily ordered Haley, “You have good night vision and a pair of binoculars, Private. I want you to scan the enemy camp for a good entry point with the minimum number of guards.”

Haley saluted Emily and then got out her modified recon binoculars. She looked over the DRA’s defenses and made note of a few things, all of which she relayed to her allies. First of all, the main entrance was a closed gate. There was also a basic fence around most of the camp. It was nothing that a real assault force would be stopped by. Haley could only see an occasional humanoid guard walking around just inside the fence. There was a watchtower on each side of the gate with one DRA sniper positioned atop each of them. There seemed to be a smaller door in the fence off to one side. It was not too far from the group’s position. This door was unguarded at the moment. However, it looked like it was currently shut and probably locked. The thing that Haley saw that most concerned her was a pair of vargs patrolling together around the perimeter of the mining camp. Haley knew that their sharp senses would make them a dangerous threat to the infiltration team. Fortunately, there were no other soldiers patrolling alongside the vargs.

Emily, after hearing Haley’s report, said, “That side door should be our way in. Still, we will need to kill those vargs before they can detect us and make any noise. Thankfully, we have our crossbows. We just need to get into range and snipe them before they realize we are here. Once the vargs are down, we need to get to the side door. Alicia should be able to pick the lock. After we have gotten inside the camp, we will dispose of any guards we encounter and then destroy the enemy artillery. That will certainly alert the DRA troops to our presence. We are going to flee out the side door after we blow up the guns. Then, we will retreat back to the truck, relying on the recovery team to cover us in case any hostiles decide to pursue us.”

Alicia added, “We will probably have to flank left away from the main gate and towards
the side door so that the DRA snipers do not see us. We will wait until the two vargs are facing away from us first. Be prepared to crawl on your stomachs, we will want to minimize our profiles from the perspective of any ground level enemies.

Emily drew her crossbow and loaded it. Alicia, Haley and Tala followed her example. After that, Emily led the infiltration team crawling forward across the plains until the vargs were not too far away. The two creatures were now facing away from the team and walking towards the main gate.

Emily quietly said, “Take aim carefully before firing. Aim for their sides and do not try to hit their limbs.”

The four women did their best to line up their shots. As the two vargs were turning slightly and beginning to walk towards the main gate, Emily took the first shot. Emily’s bolt entered a varg’s head through an eye, killing it instantly. Alicia and Haley’s bolts each landed in the second varg’s side. Tala’s bolt landed in the second beasts’ underside. The three shots brought the creature down quietly.

Emily ordered her team to quickly reload their crossbows just to be safe. Then, she led the group forward to the side door. They stayed prone the entire time.

Once the infiltration team was next to the side door, Alicia got up and crouched next to the fence while the others kept watch. The fence was designed so that it could be seen through. It was not a solid wall. Therefore, the infiltrators had to be careful of enemy guards possibly glimpsing them from the other side.

Alicia did not take much time to pick the lock. She quietly said, “This is an old lock. It’s probably civilian grade.”

Emily then carefully opened the side door and led her team inside the mining camp. Haley saw a number of tents and supply crates all around her. She also noticed that there were two sets of five long-range mortars set up not far from their position.

Emily motioned for the others to follow her deeper inside the enemy encampment. The four women were crouching, rather than crawling, now. Soon, the team found themselves near the edge of the space where the ten heavy cannons had been set up. Standing in front of them were two DRA soldiers keeping their eyes on the heavy guns.

Emily and Alicia both nodded at each other. Emily motioned for Haley and Tala to stay back. Each of them drew a short sword and quietly advanced forward. The pair of women quickly stabbed their targets in the back once they were close enough. The two DRA grunts collapsed to the ground in a heap.

Suddenly, Haley saw a second pair of DRA soldiers emerging from behind a tent just behind Emily and Alicia. Before the two enemies could react, Haley drew her kukris and pounced on them. Each of her blades entered an enemy soldier’s throat. Blood spurted out as the two enemies both expired. Haley did her best to lower the bodies to the ground quietly.

Haley turned around and saw her three comrades looking approvingly at her. Emily then motioned for the unit to move up.

When the infiltration team entered the clearing that held their targets, they saw three DRA engineers standing around the guns. They were all working diligently on some basic maintenance.
Emily simply moved a finger across her neck. Tala, understanding the order, blasted an engineer who was now walking away from the guns to a nearby supply crate with a ray of freezing cold. The beam struck the enemy in the side and she crumpled.

The other engineers each took crossbow bolts to the head from Emily and Alicia. Haley saw an enemy soldier not far away notice what was going on and taking aim with her rifle. However, a single steel-tipped crossbow bolt to the chest made short work of the lightly-armored grunt before she could shout anything.

Seeing that they were clear for the moment, Emily and Alicia each pulled an object that looked like a metal oval on a wood stick from their belts. They also handed one of the objects to Tala and Haley.

Haley asked, “These are the new Vargas Technologies hand grenades, aren’t they? I was taught how to use them in training. But, they have not been widely issued yet. Tala and I saw a DRA engineer try to use a grenade on us before. However, Lily dealt with him.”

Emily smiled and explained, “The enemy has piles of explosive shells at the ready, in case they need to open fire with those cannons at a moment’s notice. We are going to throw these at the shells and then fall back as fast as we possibly can.”

Alicia added, “We should fall back as far as we can within throwing range first. Emily and I will get one battery, Haley and Tala should take out the other.”

Tala mentioned, “This is almost like throwing a baseball, even with the stick. Now, could someone show me how to prime one of these things without blowing myself up?”

Emily gave Tala a quick lesson on how to prime her grenade. Then, the infiltration team split up and awaited the order to throw.

Emily called out, “Now!” The four women then primed and threw their grenades at the battery. When the explosives landed nearby the cannons, their blast radiuses were just large enough to set off some of the piled-up shells. As the infiltration team made a beeline for the side door, a series of fiery explosions shook the earth and destroyed all ten of the artillery pieces.

The infiltration team was now running at full speed. They saw a trio of panicked and confused DRA soldiers trying to confront them on their way to the side door. Haley rushed ahead, as Tala conjured up a force shield around herself. Haley breathed in deeply and then expelled a blast of raging flames that immolated the three hapless enemies. The section of fence just behind them was also charred and melted in multiple places.

Emily and Haley took the lead as the team continued their quick retreat. As they exited the mining camp, a bullet bounced off of Tala’s force shield. A second round narrowly missed Alicia.

Tala called out, “The enemy’s tower snipers are firing on us!”

Emily was about to draw her own rifle when two gunshots rang out from the ridge they had parked the tuck behind. Elisa and Cyril had probably had their weapons trained on the enemy snipers ever since the infiltration team had departed. Both DRA snipers went down before they could get off second shots.

Emily led her small team in a zig-zagging run across the plains. They heard more gunshots ring out from behind them and saw the flashes of shots coming down from the ridge. Elisa and Cyril were covering them by doing their best to gun down the few DRA soldiers attempting to
pursue the fleeing infiltrators.

It was not long until Haley squinted a bit and realized that the black-painted truck was rapidly speeding their way. Elisa and Cyril still seemed to be sniping the DRA troops from their vantage point. Therefore, Haley assumed that it had to be Ruby and possibly Lily in the truck.

When the infiltration team met up with the truck, Haley saw that Ruby was driving it as she had been before. The DRA soldiers who had attempted to pursue the retreating infiltrators had been forced to seek cover by the consistent sniper fire coming from the ridge.

Emily got into the passenger’s seat next to Ruby and the two women shared a high-five. Then, Haley, Alicia and Tala rushed into the back of the truck where they found Lily waiting to help them inside. The truck then sped off to the ridge where they quickly picked up Elisa and Cyril after the two snipers got off a few final suppressing shots.

The truck, now fully loaded up again, sped off into the night. The vehicles managed to reach the Terranoran lines as the night wore on. Everyone involved in the successful night mission was allowed to get changed and get some rest. They would be allowed to sleep in the next day due to their participation in the operation. Haley had noted that Lily was indeed quite pleased to see both her and Tala back safely when the truck had come to pick them up. She was also quite impressed with Cyril and Elisa’s skills as snipers. She had seen proof of Elisa’s skill as a marksman before. However, it seemed as though she had found a possible equal in the redhead mercenary.

When Haley and Lily returned to their assigned tents, wearing their casual clothes, and laid down to get some rest, Haley fell asleep almost immediately. She was glad to be back at camp safely. She was also happy that the mission had been a complete success. The biggest question now was how long would it take the Terranoran Army to march on Ouktai?
The Advance on Ouktai

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A full day had passed since the destruction of the DRA’s artillery battery nearby the city of Ouktai. The morning after that day, Lily was with Haley as she often was. The two young women were wearing their standard uniforms and walking through the Terranoran Army encampment that had formerly been under DRA control.

Haley had told Lily what she had heard from, and discussed with, Tala while the infiltration team had been on their way to the mining camp the previous day. Lily had heard about Haley’s brief relationship with a girl named Amanda back in Scralville during their time as cellmates. Back then, Lily had admitted to Haley that she was jealous that Haley had ever been romantically involved in the first place.

Loneliness had dominated Lily’s life up until very recently. Only in the last few weeks had she met people who she had allowed herself to get close to. Of course, now that she had experienced what it was like to have friends, she was not about to lose them. Lily had made peace with her having tackled Tala out of the way of the desert dragon Elisa had ultimately slain. She had admitted to herself that she had been trying to protect someone she cared about. Thankfully, she had succeeded.

The two Privates were on their way to a meeting of Flamehawk Squadron’s soldiers. Captain Joland had called it to go over the next move for the Special Actions Platoons under Major Woodstock’s command. From what Lily and Haley had gathered, they were likely going to deploy to the nearby small city of Ouktai. It was time to take the settlement back from the DRA. Doing so would allow the Terranoran Army to strike deeper into the DRA-occupied far western reaches of the continent.

When Lily and Haley were almost to their unit’s command tent, they saw that the Terranoran soldiers in the area were already scrambling for action. A significant number of military trucks, some armored and equipped with mounted machine guns and some not, had arrived at the encampment. It seemed like everyone was getting ready for something big.

After stepping inside the tent, the two Privates saw that Captain Joland was there alongside the rest of the platoon. Lieutenant Carlton was not currently present in the tent.

After the final few members of the platoon arrived, Elena explained, “Today, we are making our assault on Ouktai. Most of our forces are going to advance on the city in trucks, now that their artillery is out of commission. Our air units will be focused on stopping the enemy from escaping, or being reinforced. They will also endeavor to shoot down any aircraft or dragons that the DRA deploys to aid their defenders on the ground. Major Woodstock is going to lead her elite strike team to try and capture the city hall. Juliana and I have been ordered to work with her on this mission. The main leadership of Cerberus II will also be going with us. As for all of you, Lady Hitomi Winslow of the 15th Special Actions Platoon has been tasked with leading our main force into Ouktai. Our hope is to outflank the DRA defenders and force them to surrender, or fall back to their lines farther to the west. Juliana has already reported in to Major Woodstock. I better go and do the same. Everyone here is to report to the trucks preparing to depart this camp. You will be given your assignments there. Good luck out there. I apologize that I will not be able to lead you all directly in this battle.”

The assembled soldiers saluted their Captain and then everyone began to make their way to the lines of military trucks that had been positioned at the northwestern edge of the encampment.
Some of the vehicles, including the front ranks of armored trucks, were already filled up and driving off towards Ouktai.

Chuck led his detachment over to a nearby officer, who told them to get into one of the open-topped armored trucks. A driver had already been assigned to the vehicle. The newer model of Vargas Technologies armored truck had reinforced plating across the cabin and body. A single heavy mounted machine gun was positioned above and just behind the cabin. The new vehicles also utilized a new combination of two wheels at the front of the vehicle and tractor treads below the back, instead of another series of wheels. The DRA was believed to be using similar vehicles as frontline troop transports for their army. The armored carriers had been dubbed “half-tracks” by some of their crews and the troops who road them into battle or between bases. The trucks that would be positioned behind the half-tracks in the formation were not armored and were also unarmed. They also used the traditional wheels-only method of locomotion.

Kasha was assigned to man the half-track’s machine gun as the rest of the detachment boarded the armored vehicle.

Haley mused, as the half-track, began to drive towards Ouktai in formation with the other armored carriers, “I wonder what kind of damage these armored vehicles could do if someone mounted a light cannon on one. I guess you might have to replace the machine gun, or find a way to include both?”

The rest of Haley’s squadmates just shrugged their shoulders as the transport trucks all fell into formation behind the half-tracks. Chuck admitted, “That could be a good idea. I feel like that’s something Sergeant Falchum would come up with. She has always been interested in weaponry of all kinds.”

Howard suggested, “If you met some engineer or designer working for VT, maybe you could bring the idea to them? It would certainly make these carriers much better as direct assault vehicles.”

Elisa was holding her sniper rifle at the ready. She said, “Just let me know when we are in range of the city, the enemy might have snipers hiding in buildings. I will probably be best suited to dealing with them.”

Tala added, “I just hope that whatever civilians are left in Ouktai find some place to take cover and hide. We don’t want them getting unduly harmed in this battle.”

The rest of the detachment nodded in agreement as the formation of vehicles sped northwest across the plains toward the un-walled city of Ouktai.

As the formation began to close in Ouktai, Lily looked around and into the back of the half-track leading the formation. She noticed Alicia and Cyril Forrester were among the soldiers riding in the carrier. Cyril was wearing the same black armor he had been wearing during the night operation. Alicia was wearing what looked like a female version of Cyril’s armor. This outfit was more heavily armored than the stealth armor Lily had last seen her in. Also riding in the lead half-track was a woman wearing a lightly-armored Captain’s uniform. She looked somewhat similar to Elena in terms of skin and hair color and some facial features. However, her jet-black hair swept down at more of an angle on both sides of her head below her shoulders. She was armed with a curved short sword and a revolver at her belt. There was also a combat shotgun holstered on her back.

Lily heard Elisa mentioning, probably having noticed who Lily had been looking at, “The Captain with the raven hair is Lady Hitomi Z. Winslow of Bakaria. I must say that it was brave of her to have volunteered to lead the Northern Expeditionary Force down here.”
As Lily ducked back into her seat, Chuck sighed and said, “You all should know why I don’t like taking orders from a Winslow or a Woodstock. The current Lady of Bakaria was the main accomplice to Sandra Woodstock in my grandmother’s death. On top of her secession movement having become the precursor to the Second Rebellion. Still, we have a bigger problem to deal with now.”

Howard told Chuck, “It’s not like your family’s legacy can be rebuilt if the DRA conquers Terranoran, now can it.”

As Chuck quietly nodded, Lily felt the truck slowing down. She nervously asked, “What is going on…”

Suddenly, the sounds of artillery cannons going off could be heard in the distance from far behind the formation of vehicles. Lily peered up again and saw that they were within striking distance of the outskirts of Ouktai now. A series of barricades had been set up by the DRA troops. Enemy transport trucks and light cannons could be made out around the barricades.

Haley peered out at the enemy lines with her binoculars, as did Morasha. She said, “I think we are slowing down to give out artillery a chance to soften up their outer defenses….”

As Haley was talking, Lily realized that the Terranoran artillery crews did not want to shell the city itself. They were trying to soften up the DRA positions just outside of the city before the main assault force got inside. Suddenly, Haley was interrupted by the mighty impact of a series of explosive rounds across the DRA’s defensive lines. Enemy cannons, cover barricades and trucks were torn to pieces in the showers of fire and shrapnel.

Chuck looked up over the top of the half-track and smiled. He announced, “It looks like the higher ups finally moved some of our big guns into position! Let’s just hope that they avoid damaging too much of the city proper.”

Another barrage of shells crashed into the DRA lines as Lily mentally expressed great gratitude that the enemy’s artillery had been silenced by the infiltration team. Now, they just had to retake Ouktai before the DRA units could be reinforced.

The DRA lines around Ouktai were starting to crumble. It seemed like whoever was coordinating the Terranoran artillery crews knew what they were doing. The half-tracks and trucks began to pick up their speed again. The DRA troops holding the outskirts perimeter tried to reform their lines, only to be met with a third barrage of shells that tore through their formations.

Haley, who was still surveying the scene through her binoculars, commented, “These bastards seem better on offense than on defense. They don’t know what to do with shells raining down on their heads.”

Elisa now had her sniper rifle drawn and was sighting down its scope. She was examining the upper-floor windows of the buildings on the outskirts of Ouktai. Lily had reasonable confidence based on what she had seen so far that the half-deep elf Corporal could counter-snipe any enemies she detected.

One final barrage of explosive shells impacted the DRA’s, rapidly-dissolving, lines. Then, the Terranoran heavy cannons fell silent. It seemed like they were relying on their infantry and armored units to finish the job and take the city now.

The half-tracks and trucks advanced at full speed now. Lily could now see two squadrons of Bluejay fighters flying above them. A squadron of DRA Manticore fighters flew up to meet them.
As the airplanes began to dogfight in the sky, the motorized formation closed in on the ruins of what had been the DRA’s frontlines. The enemy troops were now falling back into the city. They now knew that they were not going to stop the counteroffensive outside the settlement.

Lily carefully drew her pistol as the motorized formation reached the outskirts of Ouktai. The members of the detachment drew their weapons as Lily wondered if the strike team had entered the city by now. Kasha readied the half-track’s machine gun to fire as the armored carriers started entering the city. Elisa, Cyril and the other snipers aboard the half-tracks began to carefully scan the upper floors of the nearby buildings for enemy snipers. They did not want to give the DRA any chance to ambush the formation from above.

Some of the soldiers from the unarmored trucks began to disembark to give the half-tracks infantry support. There was not much that they could do from inside their close-topped transports.

A few DRA soldiers, who had previously been manning the outer defensive line, opened fire on the Terranoran forces as they fell back deeper into Ouktai. It seemed like they were trying to draw the attacking force somewhere deeper inside the city.

Chuck told his subordinates, as the half-tracks’ machine guns opened fire on the enemy stragglers, “We should be closing in on the main street of the city. They could have more troops awaiting us there. Be on your guard and have your weapons ready. I want force shields up at the first sight of more hostiles.”

The detachment members saluted their Sergeant. As the two forces’ fighter planes dueled in the sky, the half-tracks entered onto the main street. The armored vehicles’ infantry support rushed forward to cover their flanks. This battle would be key to determining the Terranoran Army’s future ability to retake settlements under DRA control. Lily steadied herself for combat. She knew that the DRA would certainly have more units waiting for them. They were not about to retreat from Ouktai without putting up a fight.
The Battle of Ouktai

The arrow-shaped formation of seven Terranoran Army half-tracks had finally burst out onto the main street of the West-Terranoran mining city of Ouktai. Behind them were almost two dozen military trucks and a considerable number of infantry soldiers. The wide-open thoroughfare was lined with hastily-erected barricades. Behind these impromptu, thrown-together, defenses the DRA defenders stood and crouched. Some DRA soldiers were taking cover behind cars, trucks and trolleys that had been parked at various points along the long street.

Other than the assortment of infantry positions, the main street was defended by a quartet of DRA half-tracks. The four armored vehicles were painted light grey and had marking on their sides similar to the patches on the shoulders of the DRA’s foot soldiers. As the two sides’ infantry opened fire with rifles, pistols, machine guns and spells, the commander of the assault force, Hitomi Winslow stood up in her half-track and aimed an open palm at the DRA half-track on the far-right. A series of four twisting beams of red light flew from her hand and pierced the vehicle’s armor. As both sides’ half-tracks machine guns began to open fire, Hitomi’s light rays sliced into the half-track’s engine. The vehicle was destroyed in a consuming fireball.

Elisa, Cyril and the other Terranoran Army snipers were now focused on counter-sniping. Some bullets had been flying from the upper levels of various buildings down at the assault force’s infantry.

Howard had his shield and warhammer out. He stood ready to heal any of his squadmates who needed it. Lily and Tala had conjured their force shields. Haley and Morasha were taking shots at DRA soldiers hiding behind cover with their rifles.

As for Chuck, he took aim at another enemy half-track’s machine gun turret and sent a flaming meteor right into it. The gun was smashed by the spell and rendered unable to fire. Now, only two of the DRA half-tracks were still able to cover their infantry with their machine guns.

Suddenly, as Tala nailed an enemy window sniper with an accurately thrown frozen dagger, Lily had an idea. She shouted, “Someone throw a primed grenade at one of the enemy half-tracks with a working machine gun turret! I know that it won’t travel far enough. Just trust me!”

Haley ducked behind their half-track’s armor plating for cover and retrieved a hand grenade. She then shouted to Lily, “I trust you! Just make this count!”

As enemy bullets bounced off of Lily’s force shield, she stood up and readied a basic spell. Haley then primed her hand grenade and threw it towards an enemy half-track’s machine gun turret.

Lily smiled at Haley and conjured a hand of force that caught the grenade as it reached the apex of its flight. The hand then sped towards the DRA half-track’s machine gun turret. Lily had the hand let go just in time to drop to grenade right over the turret. The explosive fell right into the lap of the DRA gunner and detonated. The explosion both killed the gunner and rendered the machine gun he had been manning inoperable.

Haley called over, “Nice one, Lil!”

Lily ducked for cover and replied, “Just one half-track turret left!”

Tala and Elisa were doing a solid job helping to clear out the DRA’s window snipers. Haley and Morasha both took cover to reload their weapons as Chuck opened fire on the enemy’s infantry.
using his rifle. The main force of allied infantry was advancing slowly and steadily up the street. Heavily armored soldiers, many of them carrying heavy metal shields, were providing cover for their firearm-wielding allies.

The two enemy half-tracks with disabled gun turrets were starting to fall back. A number of DRA vargs were released into the streets to charge at the advancing Terranoran infantry units. Along with the vargs came a pair of wyverns. However, the semi-sentient creatures soon found themselves under heavy fire from the seven Terranoran Army half-tracks’ machine guns.

The vargs, since they were not interested in seeking cover, were mostly mowed down before they could reach the advancing infantry units. The voracious creatures were undeterred by the storm of gunfire and kept advancing despite taking massive losses.

A few of the vargs reached the Terranoran infantry line. However, Chuck sent a wave of fire down from his elevated position onboard the half-track to roast two of the beasts. Haley took down another varg with four rapid shots from her rifle.

The two wyverns flew up to try and attack the half-tracks from above. Lily quickly snapped her fingers on both of her hands, causing two small explosions of sound to erupt right in front of one of the wyverns. The blasts tore through the creature’s bat-like wings, just as Lily had planned it. The monster was forced to try and keep itself airborne where it was made an easy target for a barrage of gunfire from the Terranoran infantry lines. The hulking flyer finally gave out and plummeted to the ground, dead.

The second wyvern landed atop a half-track on the opposite side of the formation from the one Lily was in. The creature started doing its best to rip the vehicle’s riders to death. However, Cyril Forrester nailed it with a bullet through an eye while riding in the lead half-track. The attacked half-track rapidly went into reverse so that the Wyvern’s corpse fell off of its front, rather than risking crushing the surviving troops in the back of the armored vehicle.

The final DRA half-track was focusing its fire on covering its allied infantry as they tried to hold their defensive positions. However, Howard aimed his hammer at the vehicle’s hood. A blast of purple fire shattered the armor plating over the half-track’s engine.

Tala shouted, “Shoot the motor!”

The entire detachment opened fire on the half-track’s exposed engine. The barrage of bullets peppered the motor. Kasha used the half-track’s machine gun to land a few high-power rounds right into the engine. The half-track finally exploded with its engine destroyed.

The two DRA half-tracks that had lost their machine guns, but had not been entirely destroyed, were falling back at full speed now. There was not much else they could do for their infantry units. The DRA infantry soldiers were also starting to fall back farther and farther down the long street. Six of the seven Terranoran Army half-tracks were still advancing. Down the street. Only one of the vehicles had been stopped by the wyvern corpse that had blocked its path. That half-track was hanging back to protect the unarmored trucks and support infantry now.

Chuck pointed out, as the enemy was now starting to retreat, “It looks like nobody is showing up to reinforce them. That hopefully means that their command center in the Ouktai City Hall is too busy trying to hold off the strike team to send much in the way of backup.”

Lily suddenly saw something and called out, “More enemies are coming this way! I don’t like the look of the troops leading them!”
Emerging onto the main street were a pair of giants. Each of them had a face akin to a spined predatory dinosaur, the face of a forest dragon. Alongside the reptilian giants were a trio of half-forest dragon humanoids and a small squad of regular DRA infantry. The draconic units did their best to rally their fleeing troops as the fighter aircraft of both sides continued to do battle in the sky above the city.

Each of the giants was carrying a portable machine gun and had an enormous sword at his back. The trio of humanoid crossbreeds were carrying combat shotguns and also had greatswords at their backs. As the DRA force made one final push to keep the Terranoran troops at bay, the giants opened fire with their machine guns.

The Terranoran infantry units were forced to start falling back to behind the half-tracks. The infantry units atop the half-tracks did their best to return fire on the, now advancing, enemy heavy troopers.

Tala conjured up a fresh force shield as bullets flew around the half-tracks with new intensity. She then generated a dagger of ice in her hands. Lily generated a new force shield. Haley glared over at the enemy half-dragons as she took cover.

As for Elisa, she took a glancing bullet to the side. However, she rapidly channeled a pulse of white and green light to relieve her pain, heal her wound, and allow her to keep fighting.

Haley suddenly told Lily and Tala, as Tala tossed her ice dagger at one of the armored giants, “Same combo as last time! I have a plan! We need to take out the enemy half-dragons!”

Lily unquestioningly tapped Haley on the shoulder while casting her speed enhancement spell. Tala then made Haley invisible with a touch of her back and a snap of her fingers.

Haley disappeared as the trio of smaller half-forest dragons led their regular infantry forward. The Terranoran Army half-tracks’ gunners were currently distracted by the heavily armored pair of giants advancing on them.

Suddenly, mere seconds after disappearing from the half-track, Haley reappeared into front of the charging enemies and breathed her blast of fire onto the three human-sized enemy half-dragons. Four of the regular DRA soldiers were also caught in the torrent of flames.

The four regular soldiers and two of the half dragons were felled by the sudden inferno rushing out at them. The half-dragon at the center of the formation partially evaded the rushing flames and countered by firing a blast of shot from his shotgun at Haley.

Haley tried to dodge using her still magically, enhanced speed. However, she was still perforated by the shot across one side of her stomach.

As Haley clutched her side and staggered back, Lily screamed angrily and unloaded her pistol into the injured half-dragon leader. One shot struck him in the neck and he finally went down.

Kasha and the other nearest half-track gunner focused on covering Haley against the remaining enemy infantry. The pair of machine gun carrying half-dragon giants finally had to reload their weapons. Taking advantage of the giant’s distraction, Hitomi sprang up and fired four of her red energy rays into one of the towering half-dragon’s heads. He collapsed to the ground before he could complete his reload. He had already been injured by the half-track’s machine gun fire.

As the surviving giant looked over towards his recently-slain comrade, Elisa took careful aim and then fired her sniper rifle. Her shot went right through the monstrous brute’s eye. Lily noted that...
shooting larger creatures right through their eyes seemed to be common tactic of elite snipers. The second reptilian giant collapsed to the ground, dropping his machine gun in the process.

The DRA troops were now falling back again. They had lost their chance to regain ground and they knew it. The Terranoran half-tracks’ machine guns were running out of ammo. However, they had managed to wipe out most of the DRA troops on the main street. The artillery barrage that had wiped out most of the DRA defensive lines on the outskirts of Ouktai had certainly been a boon to the Terranoran counterattack. Not having to fight their way past an intact outer defensive line had allowed the assault force to bring their full firepower to bear against the DRA’s backup defenses.

Now, the Terranoran Army infantry surged forward, the DRA soldiers were pretty much out of places to hide and were in full retreat. In the skies above, it seemed like the DRA’s Manticore fighters had been dealt with. The Terranoran Air Corps’ Bluejays were patrolling the sky above Ouktai, likely looking for enemies to strafe.

Haley was hanging back and clutching her side as the main infantry force now advanced to try and overwhelm the surviving enemy soldiers. As their allies kept advancing, some Terranoran troops fanned out into side streets. The snipers stayed on the lookout for any enemy stragglers in the upper floors of nearby buildings. From what the assault force could tell, most of the city’s civilians had tried to hide themselves away from the action when the thundering sound of artillery was first heard.

With the battle seemingly won, Chuck ordered his detachment, “Out of the half-track everyone except for Kasha! Elisa, keep watching the open windows for any enemy snipers we might have missed earlier. Howard, I think that Haley needs your assistance as soon as possible.”

Lily and Tala ran to Haley with Howard close behind them. Haley looked over at her comrades and gave a vague toothy smile. Lily embraced Haley when she reached the half-dragoness, saying, “That was so stupid of you to run out like that!”

Haley just sighed a bit, smiled a toothy smile and replied, “Well, it worked…”

Lily chuckled, her arms still around Haley. She knew by now that Haley was not the type to regret doing something brave and risky.

Right after Lily let go of her first friend, Howard healed her punctured side with a brief pulse of purple energy.

Chuck looked over his subordinates and told Haley, “Once again, your bravery has led to you distinguishing yourself, Private. Combined with what you did when we were advancing on the DRA trench not long ago, they should consider giving you a medal. You probably knew that if those enemy half-dragons got into close range, they could use their acidic breath to injure and kill a good number of our soldiers. They also could have seriously damaged our armored vehicles.”

As friendly troops continued to advance around the detachment, Haley just saluted Chuck and told him, “Thank you, sir. You are correct regarding my reasons for risking myself in such a fashion.”

Tala told Haley, “You should just consider yourself lucky that we were able to cover you and that Howard was here to heal you. Either way, I’m just glad that you are not dead after what you just pulled off.”

Elisa suggested, as she continued to dutifully scan the nearby windows for enemies, “Sergeant, do you think that we should try to find out what happened to our Captain and the other strike team members?”
Chuck nodded and responded, “That is not a bad idea. Alright, everyone, we will go with our allies headed for the city hall. We will see if Major Woodstock’s surprise attack there was a success. Then, we will hopefully regroup our platoon and await further orders.”

All of the disembarked members of the detachment saluted their Sergeant. Then, they followed their allies towards the Ouktaï City Hall. There, they hoped to locate their commanding officer and see what their next orders were.
When the detachment arrived at the Ouktai City Hall, they discovered that the DRA had already retreated from the large, dark-brown, domed building. The barricades the DRA had set up around the building had all been abandoned and the corpses of enemy soldiers littered the area. The burnt-out shell of a DRA half-track was smoldering not far from the entrance to the city hall. No flag currently flew above the city hall. However, its flagpole was intact, as was most of the building itself.

Standing behind cover in front of the city hall were Emily Falchum and Ruby Benson. With them were six Terranoran Army soldiers, all of whom had their rifles at the ready. They were all aiming down the street, likely having expected a counterattack from the DRA.

Emily saw the detachment coming towards the city hall and called out, “I take it that the main street is secure?”

Chuck nodded as his squad closed in on the city hall. Ruby then smiled and added, “We managed to secure this building after circling around the city’s outer defenses. E…Captain Joland and my older brother are with Major Woodstock right now. They are looking for intact enemy documents inside of the city hall. Lieutenant Carlton has taken a couple of our soldiers with her. They are investigating the condition of our civilians in this city under the hostile occupation to ideally learn more about the DRA and their long-term plans.”

Howard informed Ruby, “After our artillery surprised their outer defenses and pummeled them to ruins, we were able to enter the city. We then made our way up the main street where we confronted waves of DRA infantry and some armored vehicles. Ultimately, even their final counter-charge was unable to hold off our advance.”

Lily looked over to Haley and added, “Lieutenant Benson, Private Haley was responsible for taking down multiple enemy half-dragons, sustaining severe injury in the process. She prevented those enemy units from reaching our half-tracks and main infantry force.”

As Tala and Elisa nodded in agreement, Emily looked suitably impressed. Haley was probably blushing. However, her red scales hid any color that might have entered her cheeks.

Ruby then replied, as businesslike as ever, “If you believe that one of your comrades deserves special commendation, then you should take it up with your commanding officer.”

Lily nodded and saluted Ruby. Emily said, “You all might as well head inside and report in to your Captain. She will probably want to know what you just told us.”

Chuck nodded and then gave a salute. He then led his troops past the barricades and inside the city hall. More Terranoran soldiers began to arrive just as the detachment headed inside. Inside of the central lobby, they found the corpses of three dark-scaled winged reptilian beasts with heads like those of crocodiles with the eyes positioned higher than usual and a spined fin above the back of the head. One of the creatures was far larger than the other two. Haley seemed to recognize the fallen creatures. She identified them to her comrades as swamp dragons.

It was not long until the detachment found Elena in the basement of the City Hall. There, she was going over some folders of documents with a blonde human woman with light skin. The older woman had long, straight, hair and was wearing a well-armored Terranoran Officer’s Uniform. She had a large, two-handed, warhammer of some kind at her back along with a semi-automatic rifle.
The blonde woman, who Lily realized had to be Major Tanya Woodstock, Captain Emmet Benson’s fiancée, looked at the soldiers walking into the room. She saw Chuck first and sneered, “Yes? I would hope that this is important.”

Chuck said nothing in return. Elisa rolled her eyes, sighed and stepped up. Giving a salute, she said, “Apologies for the intrusion, Major. We are just here to report in to Captain Joland.”

Elena stepped forward and asked Tanya, “Should I attend to my soldiers, Major?”

Tanya gave a dismissive wave and told Elena, “Yes, you are dismissed for now. Once Emmet comes back, he will help me continue to sift through these papers. Thankfully, the enemy had no time to burn them. Also, those fools did not think to encode them. In their arrogance, they thought that this city would be theirs’ for good.”

As Elena led her subordinates upstairs, Tanya shot a nasty look in Chuck’s general direction. She then got back to work on sifting through the DRA documents.

Once the detachment and their Captain were upstairs, they noticed that Terranoran soldiers were now trying to clear away the DRA bodies. They were also trying to find out how to dispose of the dragon corpses effectively. The occasional sound of Bluejays flying over the building on air patrol could also be heard. The Terranorans were not about to let Ouktai fall back into DRA hands. They would make sure to reinforce their position as soon as they could. With any luck, the DRA would not have the troops available to move on the city again anytime soon.

The detachment’s members briefed their Captain on the events that had just transpired. Everything from the initial artillery barrage clearing out the DRA’s defensive positions to Haley’s heroism against the final wave of DRA defenders was covered.

Elena smiled once her subordinates finished their report. She said, “It looks like we have won our second major engagement of this war here. As you can probably tell, we have captured the City Hall and slain its defenders. The frontlines will soon move up, allowing us to continue pushing the DRA towards the ocean. As for Private Haley, I will see what I can do about getting your valor recognized. I also heard about your bravery during the charge across the trenches earlier. Not to mention that you went with Emily and Alicia on their impromptu stealth mission and distinguished yourself then.”

Haley simply saluted Elena and stammered, “Thank you, ma’am.” She seemed actually somewhat surprised that she was being recognized for her brave actions and impressive performance.

Lily wondered if Haley had expected the Terranoran Army to be rougher on her due to her draconic ancestry. Thankfully, she had been accepted in the “oddball” unit that was Flamehawk Squadron. Lily was also impressed that the strike team had killed three swamp dragons, destroyed an enemy half-track and wiped out, or driven away, the DRA infantry at the city hall. They seemed to have done so with minimal, or non-existent, casualties. They really had assembled an elite team after all.

Elena continued, “For the time being, I want you all to assist in cleanup operations, including hunting down any remaining enemies left in this city. Our main force will begin setting up positions to complicate any possible DRA attempts to retake this place. They will also likely work on moving some of our artillery units into the city and its surroundings. Regardless, while Juliana is out seeing what she can do for the local civilians, you should see what work Ruby has for you. And, of course, good work as usual.”
The members of the detachment all saluted Elena. They then began to head over to Lieutenant Benson’s position. As Lily was turning to follow the others, Elena said to her, “Private Lily, I must say that I have been impressed with your performance so far. I knew that taking you on was a risk. However, it seems to have paid off.”

Lily turned to her Captain and blushed a bit. She then nodded and replied, “Yes, ma’am.”

Elena added, “It sounds like you used a minor force hand to extend the range of one of Haley’s grenades to great effect. I like the way you think.”

Lily simply nodded. She then thought for a moment and asked her commanding officer, “Remind me, ma’am, where did you meet Lieutenant Benson?”

Elena replied, “At the Agharta Academy of Magic. They let me in back in 1908 thanks to my unique, by Terranoran standards, spirit calling talents. I was born in Eulidia, you know. Still, this land had become more my home than Eulidia ever was, even after I led the movement that overthrew the Eulidian church and state.”

Lily awkwardly asked Elena, “Did they like you at the academy, ma’am?”

Elena thought for a moment and told Lily, “If we survive this war, then I would be happy to write you a letter of recommendation. I think that Tala has also studied there. You and her seem to be friends now. Maybe she can put in a good word for you?”

Lily smiled happily, saluted Elena and told her, “Thank you, ma’am. I should go and join the others now. …By the way, I do hope that Haley gets some sort of reward for her bravery. She really does deserve it.”

Elena simply nodded and saluted Lily back. She told the half-light elf, “I will do my best. Honestly, I am just glad that she has gotten nothing worse than an occasional dirty look from other units’ soldiers so far.”

Lily nodded back at Elena and then headed outside to report in to her detachment and Lieutenant Benson.

A week passed after the initial liberation of Ouktai. The Terranoran Army managed to rapidly begin fortifying the newly-freed city. Along with trucks, they used cargo airships escorted by Specter and Polaris Squadrons to move in artillery units and other equipment. The railway lines between Buraso and Ouktai were still unusable. They had been dynamited by the Terranoran Army to help hold back the DRA after they had captured Ouktai earlier that year.

News continued to come in that the larger DRA force in Ruvia was still making its way up the peninsula, crushing all resistance to its advance. However, the DRA was now no longer actively advancing on the Western Front. The Terranorans had finally been able to dig in and hold off the more thinly spread DRA forces in the west. The northern portion of the front was now starting to see the tide turning in favor of the Terranorans. However, rumors swirled that the DRA had been amassing most of their western forces somewhere to the south. They were most likely planning some kind of renewed offensive down there, rather than fighting what could become a losing battle in the northwest.

As for Sergeant Adams’ detachment, like most of the other soldiers, they performed various duties around the city. Clean up, fortification, helping civilians, patrols, a bit of reconstruction work. The members of the Special Actions Platoons were given slightly preferential housing in Ouktai, much to Lily’s joy. She and Haley were sharing a two-bed room in a small hotel near the center of the
city. The liberated civilians were doing their best to accommodate the soldiers who had driven away the DRA occupiers.

The Terranoran forces, mainly their engineering units, also did their best to work on reopening Ouktai’s various mines. The DRA had been forcing apprehended civilian dissenters to their occupation to work in the mines with little protection or training. The normal, professional, miners were allowed to keep working for pay. However, it was less than they had normally made and they were kept separate from the forced laborers. Reports had arrived that in other DRA occupied areas, civilians who protested the new authorities were either arrested and locked away, or sent away to become forced laborers. The whole situation seemed to deeply concern Elena and Juliana. It also raised Haley’s fears regarding what could be happening in her hometown of Scralville back in Dalugon.

One afternoon just over a week from the liberation of Ouktai, Lily returned to the room she shared with Haley is the early evening. New deployment orders had still not come in for the Special Actions Platoons under Major Woodstock’s command. That day had been the detachment’s day off. Lily had spent most of the day doing research on spells in the Ouktai library. The section on magic there had been small. However, Lily had made the best of what she could find.

Lily remembered visiting public libraries in Agharta by herself in her adolescence. Those places had been where she had taught herself to harness and control her powers. However, nobody there had paid enough attention to her to see that she had a talent worthy of removing her from her sad circumstances. Of course, Lily had been doing her best to refocus her anger at the world at large onto the DRA recently. She knew that she and her friends and comrades had no future with their adversaries still waging war on the Terranoran Continent. Besides, she was hoping that Captain Jolland’s recommendation would get her into the best magic academy in Terranor, if not Austean, after the war.

Lily was still wearing her casual clothes as she sat down on her bed and noticed a note sitting on Haley’s bed. She decided to go and read it, assuming that Haley had left it for her.

Lily picked up the note and read, “Hey, Lil. Captain Jolland has asked me to come with her and her wife to an officers’ dinner tonight. She wants to recommend me for a medal there. I will admit to being a bit nervous for once. I am leaving this for you to say that you are on your own for dinner this evening. Thankfully, our pay has come through. Anyway, I apologize for being unable to tell you all of this in person. I hope that you have a nice evening. Sincerely… Haley.”

Lily pouted a bit as she read Haley’s note. She had been hoping to go to dinner with her friend that evening. Suddenly, just after having finished reading Haley’s note, Lily heard a knock on the door. She walked over to the door and opened it to see Tala standing there, smiling. The deep elf girl asked Lily, “Hey, Lily. I have a proposition for you and Haley…”

Lily wondered what Tala was talking about. She knew that she would also have to explain Haley’s current absence to her friend. Lily decided that she would have to ask Tala what her preposition was first.
A Night on the Town

Tala was standing in the doorway of the hotel room Lily and Haley were sharing. The deep elf girl had just told Lily that she had a “proposition” for her. Tala was wearing a simple white shirt along with jet black pants and boots. The outfit reminded Lily of her old prison uniform, making her slightly uncomfortable.

Just as Tala began to notice that Haley was not present in the room, Lily informed her, “Haley was invited to an officers’ dinner by Captain Joland, apparently. She is not here right now.” Lily paused briefly, did her best to put on a smile and asked Tala, “What is your proposition?”

Tala smiled back at Lily and replied, “Well, Elisa and I wanted to invite you out with us for the evening. Think of it as a ‘girl’s night out.’ Our detachment’s two feloid privates are always together when they are off-duty. Howard is talking with the local branch of the United Church about what sort of god the Southern Dalugonians might worship, if any. Chuck was actually invited to that same officers’ dinner by Priestess Lieutenant Carlton. Therefore, it’s just the three of us.”

Lily was not sure what to make of Tala’s offer. She was still not all that used to people giving a damn about her. She did not have nearly as much experience with others trying to include her in things as most women her age did. Almost protesting, Lily asked, “What would I wear? I don’t think my normal clothes are worthy to go ‘out on the town’ in…”

Tala quickly replied, “We’ve got you covered on that front. There is a decent tailor’s shop down the street that is willing to offer free one-night suit or dress rentals to any of the Domain’s soldiers stationed here. The locals are still quite pleased that we drove the enemy away. They have the ‘honor’ of being the first Terranoran city to be successfully taken back from the DRA.”

Lily nodded slowly back at Tala. She then threw up her hands and smiled a bit. She had a feeling that Tala would find a way to outmaneuver any excuse she made. Lily then told Tala, “Fine, I guess I’m coming with in that case. Let me just get my coin purse and we will be off.”

Tala smiled at Lily and gave her a playful salute. When Lily came back over to the door with her small coin purse, she asked, “Why do you think Lt. Carlton invited our Sergeant to the dinner tonight?”

Tala suggested, as the two girls began to walk down the hallway, “Lt. Carlton is a priestess of the United Church of God. She most likely also wants to see the Coril family legacy restored, or at least improved. To her, Sapphire Coril will always be the Greatest Traitor.”

Lily asked Tala, “Do you agree with our Sergeant and Lieutenant on that subject?”

Tala nodded and explained, “Yes, but I do see the other side’s argument. I was raised in the United Church, even after the Second Rebellion reformed the Domain. I will admit to not being the most observant churchgoer, especially compared to Howard. To me the Coril line will always be the ‘righteous light elves.’”

Lily gave Tala a minor look and asked, “Haley said that you often mistrust light elves. Whoever my parents were, you know that one of them was a light elf. What does that make me to you?”

Tala blushed brightly and told Lily, “I am sorry…. Look, you were raised apart from light
elven culture and history. Besides, you are still half-human. My point is that you are still my friend, Lily. Why would I have done all I’ve done for you so far if I was bigoted against you? … Maybe I do need to work on being a bit less prejudiced, like Howard tells me sometimes? Haley seemed to agree with that notion.”

Lily shrugged a bit and admitted, “You did not judge me for being an ex-convict. To be fair, I know that the Order of Light did try to exterminate your ancestors. Still, Howard and Haley might be right about your learning to recognize your biases.”

Tala just nodded a bit. Her blushing began to come down at this point.

Tala led Lily to the hotel lobby. There they met Elisa Verite. The half-deep elf Corporal was wearing a dark green shirt and short light brown pants and brown boots. She looked ready for a wilderness hike even without any equipment. Lily explained Haley’s absence to Elisa, who mentioned that her younger sister, Clara, was in the local hospital. It sounded like Clara was working to counsel civilians who had been made to engage in forced labor by the DRA’s occupation force.

Elisa led the two Privates down the street to a small clothing shop where they found an old human couple running the place. After presenting proof of their enlistment status, the three women were allowed to browse the selection of premade dresses available for rent.

Tala quickly picked out a black dress with a medium skirt and matching gloves and stockings. Elisa went for something that had a longer skirt. Her dress was a rich dark green color. Finally, Lily went with a semi-backless light blue dress with a medium skirt. Lily had rarely had the opportunity to wear even a basic dress before. She relished the way she looked. She just hoped that there were not going to be too many unattached men wherever the trio was headed.

After confirming the rentals and promising to return the dresses the next day, the three women went to put their casual clothes back in their hotel rooms. Then, they headed out into Ouktai’s small entertainment district. Lily was not exactly sure what sort of night out Tala and Elisa were thinking of. She just kept telling herself that it was a good thing that the two grey-skinned women had decided to invite her out. She also hoped that Haley was having a good time at the officers’ dinner. She was not entirely sure how well her first friend would do in a formal environment of that kind.

Lily followed Elisa and Tala into the first floor of a building near the center of the entertainment district. The establishment’s sign read: “Martin’s.”

Martin’s turned out to be a combination, restaurant, bar and dance club. There was a live band playing, a decent-sized dance floor, a series of booths around the edge of the place and a long bar next to the dance floor. The décor was reasonably nice. Lily had seen places like this in Agharta. However, she had never been inside of one as nice as this. Certainly, the grand metropolis that was the capital of Terranor had far nicer clubs than Martin’s. Still, for the time being, Lily was glad to be where we she was.

The three women were sat down at a booth by the hostess. As they sat down and looked around, Elisa mentioned, “You know, I joined the army before the war to see new places. Still, I ended up back in West Terranor. Clara and I were raised in the city of Hadria not too far to the northeast of here.”

Lily asked Elisa, as she looked over the people dancing to the live band’s music, “Has the war reached your hometown?”

Elisa nodded no and replied, “Thankfully, the DRA had not reached the region of the
continent where Hadria sits. My parents are certainly concerned, however. Russel Verite, my human parent, is the police chief in our home city. His wife, Cleo Verite, my deep elf parent, is one of the city’s leading arcansists. She is always concerned about being drafted. I know you two are here now because of your arcane talents.”

Lily nodded and admitted, “At least being a sorceress got me out of prison.”

Tala then pointed towards the bar and quietly asked Lily and Elisa, “Is that Lieutenant Benson at the bar? It sounds like she is chatting up some guy. That is certainly not her big brother.”

Lily looked over where Tala had pointed and saw who she was also pretty sure was Lieutenant Ruby Benson wearing a sparkly deep blue dress and sitting at the bar. She was indeed talking with a dark-skinned human man in a casual suit.

Elisa nodded and quietly suggested, “Maybe she was not interested in the officers’ dinner? Maybe attendance was not mandatory? I would bet that her older brother and Major Woodstock are there, however. …Come to think of it, Emily Falchum once told me that she was actually quite the party girl whenever she is off duty.”

Tala added, “She is always so businesslike when I have seen her on duty. She always tries to act like the ideal soldier. Maybe this is how she lets off steam?”

Lily nodded, she could not help but stare at the opening on the back of Ruby’s dress for a brief moment before she returned her eyes to Tala and Elisa.

The three women ordered their dinners, paying using their recently-delivered soldiers’ pay. They ate together once their food arrived. After eating their main courses, Tala was about to get up and head onto the dance floor when the trio heard a man’s voice saying, “The beautiful and talented Elisa Verite, we meet again.”

Lily, Tala and Elisa all looked over to see a smiling Cyril Forrester in a fancy tuxedo. Nearby him were his twin sister Alicia and Sergeant Emily Falchum. Both of the young women were wearing tight, short-skirted, dresses. Emily’s was black and Alicia’s was blue. Emily was looking over at Ruby, not seeming surprised at all that she was still flirting with the same man at the bar.

Cyril then continued, “Since we happened to have this lucky chance meeting, I cannot help myself but to ask you to dance, Elisa.”

Tala and Lily both looked to the brightly-blushing Elisa. The half-deep elf sniper seemed unsure of whether to take Cyril’s now-extended hand, or recoil away in confusion.

Tala suggested to Elisa, “Why don’t you dance with him, while I see who I can find to dance with?”

Lily added, “I will probably just head to the bar. I have never tried wine before.”

Elisa just nodded and slowly took Cyril’s still-outstretched hand. Tala and Lily both got up and left the booth. Lily noticed Alicia and Emily beginning to gracefully dance with each other as she went to bar. She could not help but wonder if the two of them were more than just friends.

Lily spent the next couple of hours at the bar, trying small doses of reasonably cheap wines. She watched Ruby continue to flirt with the man at the bar. Her advances seemed to have been successful as she left Martin’s with him not long after Lily sat down at the bar. Emily and Alicia danced for hours together. They ended their long “routine” with Alicia sweeping Emily off
of her feet and planting a quick and gentle kiss on her lips. Lily smiled, being gay herself, it was not hard for her to pick up when someone else was interested in the same sex.

Soon after Emily and Alicia left, Tala and Elisa were both ready to go. Cyril had looked a bit disappointed that Elisa had only given him a quick kiss on the cheek after their dancing was done. Tala had danced with at least three men. However, she had been careful not to go any farther than that. Like Haley had told Lily before, Tala was saving herself for the whoever she believed the right man for her was.

Lily followed Tala and Elisa back to the hotel at around 10:00 PM. After the three girls said goodnight to each other, Lily returned to her room to find the lights still on. A casually-dressed and shoeless Haley was sitting on her bed and reading a book. Lily noticed that the room’s closet was open and that a sparkly silver dress was hung up inside of it.

Before looking up at Lily, Haley mentioned, “Hey Lil. Captain Joland gave me this book on Terranoran military history. I must say that it does a good job of covering both perspectives on the Second Rebellion. It paints a relatively evenhanded picture of Mara Winslow in…”

Haley then turned her head to look up at her friend and roommate, who was still wearing her dress. The half-dragoness stopped talking for a moment. She then simply uttered, “Whoa…”

Lily nervously asked Haley, “Is everything ok?”

Haley shook her head rapidly and replied, “Yes… You just look really great in that dress. Sorry… I see that you had a nice evening out without me. I’m glad about that.”

Lily blushed brightly and then told Haley, “Thank you… Tala and Elisa invited me out for an evening on the town. It looks like Emily and Alicia are possibly together…”

Haley admitted, “That was kind of obvious to me already. Still, that was quite nice of Tala and Elisa. I hope that you had a good time out with them.”

Lily nodded back at Haley as she went to get changed out of her dress. When Lily returned, she sat down on her bed in her own casual clothes. Lily then looked over at her friend and asked her, “Random question, I know that anti-dragon prejudice has been building across Terranor. What do you think this continent’s dragons have been doing about this situation?”

Haley chuckled, “You think that I know the answer because I’m a half-dragon? Still, I actually discussed the same question with our Captain and Lieutenant recently. They told me that Terranor’s sea dragons have been enraged by the DRA’s actions against their kin in Dalugon. They have been aiding Admiral Christopher Hooper’s naval units on both sides of the Ruvian Peninsula to hold back the enemy’s warships and airships. Some earth dragons have been helping in the defense of Ruvia from the DRA along with a few noble dragons. Still, many Terranoran dragons have either retreated into the wilderness or immigrated to the Flame Duchy and hidden out there.”

Lily nodded back at Haley and mentioned, “Well, I sure hope that the Flame Duchy and the Northern States join the fight on our side at some point. Whoever is leading the DRA does not seem like the type to allow anyone to remain outside of their control.”

Haley nodded as she put the book down, adding, “I don’t think that mountains will make the Flame Duchy or the Northern States safe from the DRA. Their forces practically seem to perform better in mountainous terrain, as has been proven in Ruvia. Regardless, I hate to say it, but all that we can do for now is wait here for new deployment orders. At least our forces have established solid defensive lines around Ouktai. We will have to see where our platoon is sent
Lily nodded and then moved to turn out the light for her bed. She told Haley, “You are probably right. Good night, Haley. See you in the morning.”

Haley nodded as Lily turned the light out. Lily went to sleep happy that she had gone out with Tala and Elisa. She also remembered that she needed to ask Haley if she had gotten a medal, or at least been recommended for one, the next morning as she drifted off.
Redeployment to the South

The remains of an ancient structure somewhere in the Ruvia Region of Southern Terranor:

Anyone could see that there was not much left of whatever structure had once been here. Secluded away in an isolated area in the Ruvian Mountains high above sea level were the barest remnant of a massive stone ring of some kind. A pair of grey military trucks outfitted with off-road tires were parked just outside the circle. A group of twelve soldiers wearing light grey uniforms with either red or green patches on their shoulders had fanned out into a perimeter at the edges of the ring.

Lieutenant Reira Strongwind, Commander of the Red Claw unit of the Draconic Reconquest Army was looking down at the remains of some kind of stone structure. Only the barest traces of what could have been a number of things remained. However, the fact that whatever it had been had sat at the center of the ring made it potentially interesting.

Reira was a half-flame dragon human woman in her mid-thirties. Her red scales had grown darker with age. She wore the armor of a female DRA soldier with a symbol akin to the face of a flame dragon viewed from the side on her chest and on her shoulder pads. At her belt were a rapier and a large revolver.

Standing next to Reira was a half-desert dragon human man wearing a tan and brown utilitarian outfit that still made him look quite sophisticated. Reira had recently learned that his name was Loktar Suleiman. Keeping watch nearby Reira and Loktar was a young Corporal, another crossbreed human and flame dragon. Her name was Andrea Syval and she was one of Reira’s subordinates.

Reira admitted to herself that she was bored with the whole situation. Andrea was not showing any signs of having an opinion on the matter. At least, Loktar Suleiman was a gentleman and respectful towards the soldiers escorting him, even the ones without draconic blood flowing through their veins.

Loktar, after spending what felt like twenty minutes examining the ruined foundation walked back over to Reira and Andrea. He looked the two soldiers over and told them, “I know that you would rather have been on the frontlines, Lieutenant Strongwind. Still, this site certainly bears further research. I believe that it very well could have been a meeting place for dragons dating back thousands of years.”

Reira folded her arms and replied, “My father insisted that Corporal Syval and I accompany you and your escorts to examine this site.”

Loktar chuckled and replied, “Your Red Claws are known as skilled infiltrators and skirmishers. However, your counter-insurgency skills were what got you this assignment. Lord Ralshenkus did not want any possible Terranoran guerillas in the vicinity interrupting my work.”

Reira nodded, thinking, “I still don’t know why my father insists on playing lapdog to someone of equal rank as him. …It is not my place to judge his actions.”

Reira was snapped back into reality when Loktar continued, “Then again, I did hear the story of the one target you could not capture even over the course of twenty years….”
Reira’s clawed hands balled up into fists. She was unsure why her charge was taunting her all of the sudden.

Loktar realized that he had angered Reira and apologetically added, “I know that her defection must have been incredibly hard on you. Still, you continue to serve the DRA cause loyally. For that, I actually admire you, Lady Reira.”

Reira admitted to herself that Loktar knew how to turn on a dime verbally. Maybe he was more than just some arcane archaeologist from the desert dragon lands after all? She replied, “My father’s word is my command. Now, should we return to base soon? I assume that you will want your full team brought in soon.”

Loktar nodded and said, “Yes, I will want my full team. My patron in the court of the Earth Dragon Lady, Sinnia, landed at Peralho Harbor mere days ago with the rest of my archaeological team.”

Andrea mentioned, “You must be lucky to have the support of a daughter of the Earth Dragon Lady. We wish their military might was more firmly in support of our efforts here…”

Reira heard a gusting noise from above and heard a booming male voice chuckle, “Well spoken, Corporal.”

Every person in the ring looked up to see an enormous forest dragon wearing a golden crown with multiple emeralds glistening in it descending into the clearing. Following him was a flame dragon larger than a full-grown elephant. The flame dragon wore a similar crown covered by rubies.

The humanoids and half dragons all instinctively fell to one knee as the two mighty reptilians landed in front of Reira, Loktar and Andrea.

The flame dragon looked down at Reira and told her, “Rise, my child and report in.”

Reira rose from her knee and told the flame dragon, “Father, the area is clear for the time being. Loktar will send for his full team as soon as we are back at base. They should already be in the region.”

The flame dragon responded, “Excellent. I will see you redeployed to the front lines to meet up with the rest of the Red Claws tomorrow.”

The forest dragon looked over at the flame dragon and told him, “Kralthorix, the young Corporal speaks for me with regard to the reticence of the rulers of the earth, noble and foothill dragons to contribute more forces to this war.”

Kralthorix responded, “Lord Ralshenkus, we already have the full support of Lord Lotharax of the desert dragons back in Dalugon. The swamp dragons are almost as enthusiastic in their backing of Operation Grand Destiny. Their Lord is commanding our armies in the west, after all. Once Agharta falls, I believe it is likely that the other three rulers will become more willing to participate in our mission. They will also want to reap the spoils of the new empire we are building.”

Ralshenkus nodded and added, “Regarding the Terranoran Capital City, our commanders to the west have informed me that they have made a major breach in the Terranoran Army’s western lines to the south of Agharta. That is despite our recent unexpected losses up north. Our forces will attempt to send as many divisions towards Agharta through the breach as possible. We may not
take their capital. However, we will keep distracting the Terranorans from investing their full forces in stopping us here. There is also another maneuver Lotharax and I have been planning for the near future.”

Kralthorix nodded at the older dragon. He then ordered his daughter, “Reira, you are to escort Mr. Suleiman back to base. Take the soldiers with you. Another unit is on the way to relieve them on guard duty. Your lovely and perceptive young Corporal shall return with you as well.”

Reira bowed to her father. She replied, “As you command.”

Loktar, as he was about to leave with Reira and Andrea, told Ralshenkus, “My Lord, I promise that I will gather more data on this ruin once we commence our full excavation.”

Ralshenkus, as the DRA soldiers began to leave the site, responded, “See to it. You come well-recommended Mr. Suleiman. I expect you to find proof that great draconic civilizations once existed on this continent. I want the locals to understand our right of rule once their government gives in.”

Reira noticed, as Loktar bowed to Ralshenkus, that Andrea seemed on the verge of tears. However, they were not tears of sadness. Reira knew that for someone of Andrea’s status, being acknowledged by a Dragon Lord, especially the supreme commander of the DRA, was a truly great honor.

Reira led Loktar, Andrea and the rest of their team back to their trucks. Kralthorix and Ralshenkus remained in the ring. The two of them conversing quietly. Any hostiles who could somehow find the two dragons would surely be obliterated by the combined might of the lords.

One the ride back to the nearest DRA base, Loktar looked across the truck at Reira and asked her, “Regardless of what I said earlier, I am interested in learning more about your past exploits, Lieutenant Strongwind. Maybe we could discuss them over a drink or two?”

Andrea was still stunned by the fact that Lord Ralshenkus had acknowledged her, so she said nothing. Reira thought, “I should not even be going by the last name Strongwind. My mother never loved me anyway…” She then looked back over at Loktar and told him, “Fine. If you’re buying. We can have a chat.”

Loktar grinned with his teeth showing. He responded, “Of course. What else would a gentleman do?”

Reira rolled her lizard-like eyes a bit. She thought, “Just like someone with desert dragon blood to be so formal. That species is known for following rules and procedures, at least when they are not fighting.”

As the truck made its way back to the DRA base nearby a small occupied mountain town, Reira wondered what Loktar drank. She also admitted to herself that it would be nice to relax a bit before returning to action. What she wanted most, as always, was for her father to complement her the way Andrea had just been complimented. She had a feeling that the young Corporal would not forget this day anytime soon.

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Two days after Lily’s night on the town with Tala and Elisa, she was walking with Haley through a military encampment just outside of Ouktai. Both women were wearing their uniforms and carrying all of their equipment. It had turned out that Haley had been recommended for a
medal by Captain Joland at the officers’ dinner two nights ago. It had not arrived yet. However, Elena had told Haley that it would likely be approved shortly. Haley had also danced with Chuck that evening. However, nothing else had occurred between the two of them. The day before, all of the rented dresses had been returned to the shop from which they had been procured.

It was not until Lily and Haley arrived at Flamehawk Squadron’s current command tent. There, they found their unit assembling and Captain Joland and Lieutenant Carlton already there. The two officers were standing in front of a table with a map of Western Terranor on it.

Once every current active-duty member of the platoon had arrived, Elena began, “I am sorry to have to tell you all this, but today we are moving out from this city. We are being redeployed, along with the other four Special Actions Platoons under Major Woodstock’s command, effective immediately.”

Juliana used a pointer to indicate a spot on the map. The area she was pointing to was in the far south of what was considered Western Terranor. She then explained, “The enemy has made one massive push against the southern flank of our Western lines recently. Yesterday, they broke through and their forces are pouring through as fast as they can. Rather than engage our defenders to the north, the enemy columns are making a beeline for Central Terranor. We think that they might be trying to target our capital city.”

Elena added, “All five of our Special Actions Platoons in this region are going to be driven to Buraso. We will be boarding trucks and half-tracks within the next two hours. From there, we will be taking trains from Buraso all the way to the small riverside village of Aryso on the plains southwest of Agharta. From there, we will be joining a small force of our soldiers who are currently working on fortifying a series of hills nearby Aryso. Artillery units from Agharta are on their way to Aryso now. From the hills, our artillery should be able to seriously inhibit the enemy’s ability to pass through the area safely. We will force them to attack our hilltop positions directly to try and silence our big guns. Fortunately, the DRA units who have broken through our southern lines do not currently have vehicular air support. They have also not been able to move many of their artillery units through the breach as of now.”

Juliana finished, “Everyone here is to get ready to depart and meet back here within two hours. Unfortunately, most of our other units on the Western Front are too focused on preventing other DRA breakthroughs and pushing the enemy back where possible to aid us in defending the Aryso region. This assignment will not be easy. However, it is highly important. We are being sent in here because we are the elites of the Terranoran Army. We cannot allow the DRA to take down our artillery positions, are we all clear?”

The members of Flamehawk Squadron all saluted their commanders. As the unit’s members scrambled to get ready for their redeployment, Lily could not help but be nervous. The DRA was still making aggressive maneuvers, despite their recent losses. They were clearly an adaptable force. That much was now obvious to her.
The soldiers of Special Actions Platoons 11 through 15 boarded a series of military trucks and half-tracks, after packing up all of their personal equipment. By the end of the day, they had reached Buraso and boarded a pair of trains headed for Aryso by way of Fabasu. The trains were going at full speed this time as they made their way towards Aryso.

That evening, the trains arrived at the small station of the small riverside milling town of Aryso. From the station, the trains disgorged the infantry platoons they had been transporting. A small series of military trucks and half-tracks were waiting at the station to pick up the, newly-arrived soldiers. However, some of the infantry still had to march over to the hills. officers and lighter infantry units such as arcanists were given preference in terms of who got to ride in the vehicles. Lily got to ride in one of the trucks. She spent the final leg of the trip sitting next to Tala. Haley had to walk along with most of the rest of the detachment.

By the time that night had fully fallen over the plains, Major Woodstock’s forces had reached the series of hills Captain Joland had mentioned during the morning’s briefing. Both at the tops of the hills and closer to the bottom dozens of Terranoran Army engineers, mostly dwarves, goblins and kobolds, were working on the construction of fortifications. They were also moving light and heavy cannons into position.

Fortunately for the new reinforcements, a significant number of tents had already been set up by the engineers and the small force of regular soldiers protecting them. Some of the new arrivals had to pitch their own tents. However, many of them were allowed to use the tents that had already been set up in preparation for their arrival.

After sleeping through the night, Lily and Haley, who had been sleeping in tents right next to each other’s, woke up the next morning. The two of them ate some breakfast rations and then managed to find a spot at the foot of the largest hill, but still behind the defenses, where their platoon was gathering.

Upon arriving, Lily and Haley noticed Captain Joland talking with a human man around her age. He was wearing an unarmored Terranoran Army Lieutenant’s uniform with a combat knife and a heavy revolver at his belt. However, the outfit was clearly not being kept in good condition. His skin was slightly dark, probably marking him as having Southern Terranoran descent. His hair was black, short and unkempt. The state of the Lieutenant’s uniform and hair made it obvious that he had been hard at work on some physical task recently.

Elena looked over her assembled soldiers and explained to them, “This gentleman is Lieutenant Theodore Vargas of the Terranoran Army Artillery Corps. He is in command of the heavy cannon batteries stationed atop of these hills.”

Theodore pointed out, “Honestly, I prefer ‘Ted’ most of the time. Regardless, as I was telling your Captain and your Major earlier, our scouts have determined that the DRA has discovered our position here. They have diverted their force towards this encampment. Most likely, they realize that they cannot risk having our big guns bombard them if they try advance past us. They will try and assault out position directly, rather than allow us to harry them as they pass.”

Elena added, “From what we can tell, the front of the DRA’s assault force will likely arrive here sometime within the next two days. For now, we are to focus on helping build up fortifications and patrol the area looking out for any possible DRA saboteurs. When the enemy is sighted, our platoon will be holding the defensive positions at the foot of the central hill. Cerberus
II will be right beside us in this defense. The other three platoons will spread out and hold our flanks. It seems as though we will be badly outnumbered by the DRA in this battle. However, I do believe that our soldiers are better equipped and more experienced than theirs. Also, we have the defensive advantage and heavy artillery support.”

The members of Flamehawk Squadron saluted their commander. They were all well aware that they would need to help ensure that the hills’ defenses were completed before the DRA columns began their assault. Unfortunately for the Terranoran forces, the air units they were used to working with were still stationed near the front lines of the Western Front. Some of them would hopefully soon be redeployed to help hold back the enemy forces still trying to push through the large breach in the Terranoran lines.

Over the next two days, the Terranoran forces defending Aryso focused on building up their fortifications and readying their hilltop heavy artillery. They also positioned their lighter cannons and machine guns at various intervals along their defensive lines. Some building materials, extra ammunition, machine guns and a few new infantry reinforcements arrived by train over those two days. The military trucks in the area were quite busy shuttling material and personnel from Aryso Station to the encampment and then returning to the station to repeat the process. Thankfully, some extra fuel for the vehicles was also delivered by train.

Two mornings from the initial briefing by Elena and Ted, alarm bells rang out across the Terranoran Army encampment. A small number of scouts rushed back to camp saying that the front of the DRA column was rapidly advancing on the hilly encampment. Two smaller forces had split off in an attempt to make a pincer attack while their main force charged the central hill’s base.

The Terranoran defenders began to scramble into their defensive positions while their heavy artillery was loaded and prepared to begin firing. Some of these guns could hit the rear of the DRA main column from their elevated position, or even targets farther away. Therefore, they would need to be aimed carefully to produce the largest possible number of accurate strikes.

Emily had pointed out earlier that Ted was the son of Alfonso Vargas and the current heir to Vargas Technologies. That being the conglomerate responsible for most of the weaponry and other heavy equipment made in Terranor. Like his father and their company’s founder Lorenzo Vargas, Ted was an artillery commander, rather than a frontline soldier.

The members of the 12th and 14th Special Actions Platoons, led by Tanya Woodstock, positioned themselves behind the hastily-constructed series of barricades standing between their artillery positions and the swarms of DRA soldiers that would soon arrive. One particular set of barricades was to be manned by Sergeant Adams’s detachment. This position was close to where Elena and Juliana were set up and was equipped with a heavy machine gun. Not far behind them was a parked half-track with its machine gun loaded and ready.

As Kasha got on the machine gun mounted atop one of the barricades, Chuck ordered his other soldiers into position. Lily remembered, as she heard the sound of heavy artillery opening fire behind her unit, that they had not seen Private Clifford since he had been stationed as a reserve soldier back in Ouktau. He had not ended up staying in Flamehawk Squadron for long. Maybe it had been for the best for him, seeing what the unit was about to face.

Not far from Lily’s positioned, she saw Captain Emmet Benson ordering his troops into position with help from Ruby and Emily. Tanya Woodstock was looking out onto the plains to the southwest with a pair of binoculars. She seemed to be waiting for something. Lily was sure that Hitomi Winslow and her mercenaries would be defending one of the flanks from the DRA’s pincer units.
Soon, Lily heard the crashing sound of artillery shells impacting to the southwest. She could now begin to make out what looked like hundreds of DRA soldiers rushing towards their position as fast as they could run. From her previous experiences, Lily was sure that the enemy would bring more than just humanoid grunts with them. She crouched behind her cover and drew her sidearm. Haley and Tala were next to her. Howard had his shield ready and Chuck had his rifle out. Elisa was positioned slightly behind her allies. She had her sniper rifle rested on a cover barricade with some armor plates flanking her weapon’s barrel and protecting her. Lily expected that Elisa would be focusing on picking off key targets and would leave the weaker enemies to her comrades, as usual.

Almost right after the Terranoran heavy artillery fired off a second salvo, Tanya shouted, “Enemy units are in range and advancing fast! Fire at will!”

Lily, Tala and the other Terranoran arcanists conjured up their magical defenses as the frontlines of the advancing DRA formation were now closing in the barricades at the foot of the central hill. Guns of all varieties went off on both sides as the battle was joined. Clearly, the DRA forces outnumbered the Terranoran troops over three to one. However, the Terranorans had the advantages of cover and artillery support. The back ranks of the main DRA formation were currently taking heavy fire from the long-range artillery pieces atop the hill.

Lily unloaded her pistol into the enemy formation as a bullet was deflected by her force shield. Tala was trying to take more careful shots with her rifle.

DRA soldiers with heavy shields tried to cover their allies as the Terranoran machine guns opened up on them. Chuck shouted, “Haley, Howard, save your fire breath for any enemy clusters that get up close! We do not to waste those blasts early in this battle.”

Howard nodded as Haley kept firing with her rifle. He then stretched out an empty hand as an enemy bullet bounced off of his shield. Howard called out, “My god might not be sending an army, but they should be able to spare these two!”

A pair of coursing orbs of purple light and fire suddenly shot out of small rips in reality that appeared above Howard’s shoulders. They flew forward, seemingly unaffected by gunfire. The orbs shot out swarms of small pulses of light into the DRA’s soldiers. The pulses did not do much individually. However, a full salvo of them could easily down a DRA trooper.

Elisa was focusing on enemies who looked like either snipers or spellcasters. She took careful, methodical shots, dropping backline targets as the waves of DRA infantry continued to advance.

Suddenly, a number of DRA shield bearers dropped to one knee and held position, taking full cover behind their shields. As they held their positions and their rifle-wielding allies fired from behind them, a series of hissing noises could be vaguely heard.

Dozens of monsters that looked like sleek, roughly human-sized, predatory cats crossed with long-horned earth dragons bounded past the DRA infantry. At the lead of the packs was a small number of horse-sized versions of the beasts.

Chuck ordered, “Keep the machine guns firing on these things! Everyone else, have melee weapons ready in case they get too close!”

Howard stunned four of the dragon-felines with a blast of sound coupled with purple lighting. Haley and Morasha quickly dispatched those foes with their rifles. Lily flung a soundwave at one of the larger beasts, slicing off one of its front legs. The creature collapsed onto
its side and was put out of its misery by a headshot from Elisa.

Another of the larger monsters was violently tackled from the side by a massive wolf shrouded in purple fire. Gunfire reflected off of the celestial hunter’s exposed side as it forced the dragon-cat onto its back and tore out its insides. After finishing its prey, the wolf rapidly shifted into the form of a humanoid canine with glowing purple eyes and wickedly sharp claws and teeth. The celestial warrior began to rapidly catch and maul the smaller beasts that tried to avenge their alpha. Its precision and strength both unnatural and astounding to behold.

Chuck smiled and said, “That has to be one of Lt. Carlton’s summons.” He then saw a trio of the dragon-cats nearing his position. He quickly shot out a hand and roasted them to death with a sudden blast of intense flame.

Tala froze one of the alpha monsters to the ground with a beam of ice aimed at its legs. That made the creature an easy target for Elisa, who slew it with another headshot.

Lily took down a smaller dragon-cat with a sphere of sound. She then realized that the DRA shield wall was growing and rapidly beginning to advance.

Lily called out, “Their infantry force is moving up again!”

Haley replied, “We have almost taken out the beast swarms!” She then used her rifle to drop another dragon-cat with a headshot.

As the DRA shield wall and the soldiers behind it began to pick up speed, a massive explosion of fire tore through the center of their formation. Lily saw Captain Joland flying above the battle on wings of fire. She was protected by a two-layered flaming force shield.

Lily could only think, “That is why they call her the ‘Flamehawk!’”

A column of purple flames blasted the left flank of the DRA infantry as Chuck shouted, “Don’t let them reform the wall! Keep firing!”

The DRA’s broken formation took two hits from light cannons positioned just up the hill. However, more enemy infantry kept moving up to replace the soldiers that had been incinerated or blown away. The few remaining dragon cats were falling back, or trying to flank around the Terranoran positions.

Suddenly, Lily heard Elena shouting, “Incoming!”

As more DRA infantry kept pouring into the battlefield, a quartet of swamp dragons, creatures Lily has only seen the corpses of before, came screeching out of the sky. Multiple Terranoran barricades were dissolved as two of the dragons breathed out blasts of acid onto them. The third dragon destroyed a light Terranoran cannon with its acidic breath. The fourth dragon breathed acid into the engine of the nearest Terranoran half-track, destroying it and taking out its mounted machine gun.

Haley screamed, “Cowards! They let their humanoid pawns soften us up before exposing themselves to possible harm.”

A pair of DRA half-tracks with their machine guns blazing advanced up to cover their infantry. One of them was taken out by the nearest Terranoran light cannon. However, the other half-track used its machine gun to take out the gun’s crew, rendering it unable to fire.

Lily saw the airborne Elena engaging in a viscous dogfight with the swamp dragon closest
to her. The other three dragons made a dive for the Terranoran defenses that still stood. Their infantry and armored vehicle were right behind them.

Despite the Terranoran heavy artillery still firing on the enemy backlines, the situation near the base of the central hill was worsening quickly. Lily looked over as Morasha downed a pair of charging DRA soldiers with well-aimed bullets from her rifle. However, she was riddled with bullets from the enemy half-track as she tried to reload her firearm. Howard ran over to try and heal Morasha. However, there was nothing he could do for her at that point.

Kasha screamed angrily and used her machine gun to counter fire at the enemy armored vehicle. By some great luck, or just good aim, she killed the gunner. However, a swamp dragon landed right in front of her position right after. Kasha unloaded a torrent of lead into the black-scaled reptile. However, it lunged at her and knocked her off of the gun turret. The dragon quickly chomped into Kasha’s stomach, killing her.

Lily saw what the closest swamp dragon had done to one of her comrades. She screamed at the injured reptilian, sending an immense bolt of reverberating sonic energy through his body. The wounded dragon vomited up green blood, which also ran from his ears. He then collapsed to the ground, clearly dead.

Lily had no time to celebrate her first dragon slaying. She looked around to see that the DRA troops were pushing ahead with all deliberate speed. Ruby sent out a massive wave of freezing energy that slowed and wounded two swamp dragons and killed at least six DRA soldiers. This allowed Emily to kill one of the dragons with a series of headshots from her rifle. Tanya and Emmet closed in on the other and hacked and bludgeoned it to death up close.

The final swamp dragon came tumbling out of the sky as Elena blasted it with one last barrage of flaming force rockets. However, the creature had managed to break thought both layers of Elena’s force shield before its defeat and death.

Lily conjured up a fresh force shield as Tanya ordered, “All units, retreat up the hill! We need to protect the heavy cannons and their crews!”

Chuck shouted, “Haley, Howard flame them to cover our retreat!”

The two half dragons nodded and then expelled great cones of fire from their mouths to incinerate a combined total of at least ten DRA soldiers.

Tala, who had also generated a new force shield for herself, tossed down a ball of icy fog into the ground in front of her. The mist and fog created enough of a distraction that Flamehawk Squadron was able to begin quickly retreating up the hill towards their back line of barricades. The soldiers of Cerberus II followed just behind them as Elena landed next to Juliana.

With the DRA troops and their last few dragon-cats now pursuing the Terranoran elites up the hill, the two Special Actions Platoons reached their backline cover positions. They also saw a larger swamp dragon the size of an elephant flying their way. The creature could end up in attack range soon. The Terranoran heavy cannons were doing their best to keep firing. However, most of the DRA units were now within their minimum range.

As Lily took cover, Elena ordered, “Hopefully, we can kill that swamp dragon quickly. She looks like the commander of this attack.”

Juliana added, “I just hope that our defenders on the flanks are holding off their pincer attackers. We may need them to come and help us out here soon!”
The DRA soldiers were forming up their ranks as both sides kept exchanging gunfire and spells. At least ten dragon-cats were preparing to pounce up the hillside to cover their masters. Lily loaded her pistol and sighted down it as the DRA soldiers continued their climb. She realized that the heavy cannons behind her were no longer firing, even though a lighter artillery piece occasionally fired on the enemy soldiers still on flat ground.

Suddenly, “Elisa called out. Do you all hear that?”

Lily was not sure what Elisa was talking about. However, maybe all of the gunfire was making it impossible for her to hear the mystery noise.

Suddenly, a flaming arrow landed in the helmet of a DRA soldier near the base of the hill. As he collapsed, another arrow took down a DRA shield bearer from the side.

Tala asked, “Arrows? Who would be…”

Many of the advancing DRA soldiers were now facing the northeast. The incoming swamp dragon had changed her flight path. She was heading towards the direction the arrows had come from. Lily could now make out a trumpeting noise.

A warm smile crossed Elisa’s face as she simply said, “They are here.”
Lily was peering over her cover as the DRA soldiers advancing up the hill had begun to slow down and look to the northeast. As the Terranoran forces were holding their positions, Elena ordered, “Open fire! We have to take advantage of their confusion!”

More flaming arrows came arcing into view, striking some of the DRA soldiers down the hill. The swamp dragon that had been previously making her way over to the Terranoran positions was now flying at full speed towards the likely source of the arrows. The embattled soldiers of the 12th and 14th Special Actions Platoons opened fire on their confused enemies. A number of DRA infantry fell to Terranoran gunfire and spells.

Lily shot out a pulse of force that managed to knock back a couple of advancing DRA soldiers and a dragon-cat. They were made easy targets for her comrades as they tried to get back up.

Suddenly, Elisa called out, “Here they come! They are riding mastodons!”

The trumpeting noise that Lily had vaguely heard earlier was now getting louder and louder. Coming into view now was a marvelous sight unlike anything she had witnessed before. Eleven massive furry pachyderms were charging at full speed towards the DRA units still at the base of the hills. Each animal’s eyes glowed bright green, similar to the eyes of the bluebird Elisa had connected with just before Lily’s first battle. Green energy coursed and flashed across the animals’ bodies, likely indicating some kind of magical enhancement. Atop each of the mighty beasts was a humanoid figure carrying a longbow. Rushing out in front of the mastodons was a small herd of rhinos. The horned herbivore’s eyes were also green and their bodies coursed with the same energy. Single riders also stood astride the faster-moving chargers. Wave after wave of flaming arrows came flying towards the DRA soldiers from the mounted warriors, the magically-enhanced projectiles slicing through their armor.

The massive swamp dragon was now closing in on the cavalry formation. However, a pair of lightning strikes blasted her back a good distance.

As the DRA’s backline forces began to turn to face the incoming cavalry charge, the rider of the lead mastodon conjured up fifteen sphere of fire above her head and sent them rushing through the air at the DRA forces. Two of the spheres crashed into and destroyed a DRA half-track that was about to open fire on the charging force. Three DRA trucks and at least a dozen infantry soldiers were obliterated by another five explosive blasts of fire. The other eight spheres streaked into the swamp dragon, smothering her with fire. The airborne dragon collapsed out of the sky, almost every inch of her body singed horrifically.

A clearly impressed Elena gasped, “A flaming storm? Even I haven’t mastered that spell yet!”

Chuck blasted a DRA dwarf with a beam of crackling fire and then looked down at the charging cavalry. He smiled and said, “These people have to be druids. That means that an old family friend has finally come to our aid!”

Elisa added, “I see my old friend Lila down there! She is riding one of the mastodons flanking the lead one!”
The charging rhinos rocketed forward and began to gore the DRA troops unlucky enough to end up in their paths. Some of the druid riders launched conjured javelins of sharpened wood at their enemies. Some of them kept firing their enchanted bows and a few of them blasted away at the DRA forces with lightning strikes.

Two more DRA trucks were destroyed by a column of fire also conjured by the lead mastodon rider. As for the advancing mastodons, they were now nearly upon the DRA troops on the ground.

As two mastodons rammed a DRA half-track and pushed it over onto its side, the DRA troops who had been advancing up the central hill began to make a full retreat down the hillside.

Major Woodstock drew her warhammer and shouted, “Charge! We have the momentum now!”

The Terranoran elites, many of whom had been running low on ammunition, drew their melee and close range weapons and began to advance down the hill towards their panicked enemies.

Howard called out, “Some of their monsters have stopped moving!”

Sure enough, most of the few surviving dragon-cat’s eyes were glowing green. They were standing submissively in place, not attacking anyone on either side.

Haley admitted, “Those beasts are pretty common in parts of Dalugon. I guess that they are close enough to animals that some druids can exert influence over them?”

With Tanya and Emmet in the lead, the Terranorans were charging down the hill now. They were covered by gunfire from the cannon crews, who had gotten out their firearms once they realized their artillery strikes could not affect the battle much more.

Elisa drew her falchion, Haley had her kukris out and Chuck was wielding his spiked chain. The arcanists, including Elena, stayed behind the armored soldiers. Juliana was advancing near the front of the charge. She had her longsword and heavy shield out. Her blade was now sheathed in purple fire, as was Howard’s warhammer.

The DRA troops, who been confidently advancing only minutes before, were now retreating. Looking down at the battle below, it seemed that the druidic forces were overcoming both their small numbers and technological disadvantage with their raw magical might. The Terranoran units that had spread out to protect the smaller hills against the DRA’s pincer squads had managed to hold out until the druids had arrived as well.

Lily stayed close behind Haley and sent out a pulse of force to knock three retreating DRA soldiers down. Tala tossed a dagger of ice into the back of a dwarven DRA trooper, staggering him heavily. He was soon gunned down by the Terranoran artillery crews. Chuck, Haley, Howard and Elisa all collided with the back ranks of the retreating DRA and began to slice into their panicked infantry.

Wielding her Kukris, Haley pounced on two retreating DRA soldiers. Elisa used a mighty swing of her falchion to decapitate two of the enemies Lily had knocked down just as they were trying to stand back up. Chuck sent lightning coursing through his spiked chain and swung it. The weapon shocked and sliced two more DRA soldiers. Howard slammed his flaming warhammer into the head of another DRA soldier who Lily had knocked down.
After Haley efficiently dispatched her two targets, the six surviving members of the detachment continued their charge down the hillside. Lily and Tala used their firearms to conserve magical energy while Chuck bravely continued to lead his subordinates forward.

Major Woodstock, showing her considerable close-combat expertise, had already dropped at least three DRA grunts with her two-handed hammer. Behind her, the other soldiers continued to push their advantage. As the Terranoran counter-charge neared the bottom of the hill where Kasha and Morasha had died, they saw the DRA’s remaining trucks loading up as many soldiers as they could and beginning to retreat. One of the loaded-up transports was consumed by a searing column of fire. The blast had clearly come from the druid riding the lead mastodon.

The DRA trucks and infantry began to flee at full speed now. They knew that staying in the fight would spell their end. These units would likely have to retreat west and likely face more Terranoran units. The divisions defending the Western Front would likely be trying to close the gap in their lines.

A javelin of lighting hurled by Captain Joland collided with one of the retreating DRA trucks. The vehicle swerved as electricity crackled across it’s body. Soon, a shell from a Terranoran light cannon connected with the vehicle, blowing it to bits with at least six DRA soldiers inside.

It was not long until the battle was over. What had been starting to look like a major victory for the DRA had turned into a stunning route. Their assault unit, the spearhead of the force that had broken the Terranoran lines to the west, had been defeated. The scant few DRA units who had managed to escape would likely return to their camp. The would likely have to make a beeline for their side’s lines before the Terranoran Army could close the breach with newly-arrived reinforcements.

The six surviving members of the Flamehawk 2 detachment now surveyed the destruction at the base of the central hill. Lily had not been able to get to know Kasha or Morasha very well. However, the two feloids had been good soldiers. Their deaths had underscored the danger the DRA assault force had posed to even the elites of Flamehawk Squadron.

As Terranoran Army engineers began to work on cleaning up the remains of barricades, heavy weapons, military vehicles and living soldiers, Haley seemed to notice something. The half-dragoness pointed to some nearby druids who had dismounted their steeds. They seemed to be leading the surviving dragon-cats towards the mastodons. There were only around eight of them in total. The strange beasts’ eyes were still glowing green from when they had been standing still. When the creatures were near the Mastodons, their legs were tied with thick ropes. The draconic creatures were then bound onto the sides of the mighty pachyderms. Their mouths were also muzzled.

Haley suggested, “Isn’t that something? I think they’re taking those creatures as prisoners. I wonder where they will be taken?”

Howard said, “If those dragon-cats are descended from ‘normal’ animals, maybe the druids view their lives as worthy of sparing? Besides, they are helpless as long as they are under mental control. It would be cruel to just murder them while they cannot defend themselves.”

Chuck pointed to a spot not far away where Major Woodstock was talking to a dark-skinned light elf women with greying black hair. The woman had a scimitar at her belt and her magically-enhanced bow at her back. She was wearing dark-green leather armor and light brown pants. Chuck explained, “That has to be Liliana DeepTree herself, the High Druid of the Central Circle. She was a Lieutenant in the First Rebellion’s Army. …She fought alongside my grandmother and her sister. Still, when Winslow and Woodstock were bombarding Agharta,
causing shells to rain down on our capital from the skies for days, her circle did nothing. They declared neutrality as long as they were undisturbed…”

Lily decided to point out, “Well, she is here now. I guess that she had a change of heart sometime in the last twenty-six years.”

Howard added, “This time, all of Terranor is under threat. As much as Sergeant Adams is right, I wish the Flame Duchy and the Northern States would follow the Central Circle’s lead and join the fight.”

As Tala nodded in agreement with her friend, Elisa noticed someone approaching the detachment. She ran over to embrace a light-skinned, blonde, light elf woman wearing light brown armor made from animal hide. The elven blonde carried the same weapons as the High Druid.

Elisa disengaged her embrace with the newly-arrived blonde and exclaimed, “Lila, you came! I just knew it had to be your circle when I saw the flaming arrows come flying in.”

Lila replied, “It took a bit of convincing. However, I managed to get Liliana to rally our warriors soon after my bird scouts reported the DRA advance to me. I had a hunch that a strong attack from the side would catch the invaders off guard.”

Elisa chuckled and replied, “I think that you mean their flank. Anyway, it is good to see you again. I have been doing my best to put what little you were able to teach me to good use since we parted.”

Chuck pointed out, “We certainly took some losses today. My detachment lost two of our Privates. Still, it would have been a lot worse if your cavalry had not arrived in the nick of time. … What I am trying to say is thank you.”

Lily noticed Ruby Benson and Emily Falchum looking over the blasted battlefield not far from them. Suddenly, a redhead young human druid wearing dark green leather armor and black pants walked over to them. Emily saw the girl and warmly embraced her.

As Lila and Elisa kept talking, Lily walked over close to Emily, Ruby and the druid girl. Ruby seemed to recognize the redhead Emily was currently hugging.

When Emily released the druidic redhead from her embrace, Lily noticed that Haley had followed her over. Lily asked, “Sergeant Falchum, you know a druid?”

Emily nodded and explained, “This is Sapphira Nightswan Falchum, my sister-in-law.”

Lily and Haley both looked quite confused as Ruby chuckled for once. Sapphira blushed slightly and explained, “You see, Emily’s older brother, Trevor Falchum is a biologist. Two years ago, he became one of the few outside scientists granted permission to visit the portion of the forests to Agharta’s southeast under the Central Circle’s jurisdiction. I was an apprentice of Lila Elesar, the original apprentice of High Druid DeepTree, at the time. As an orphan, the Central Circle was my first ‘family.’ Lila asked me to be Trevor’s guide for the duration of his visit. However, things did not go exactly according to plan in that we became lovers soon after meeting. We kept seeing each other secretly for months after Trevor’s two-week stay was over. Eventually, he proposed to me and I accepted. I left the circle amicably and moved into the city. However, when this war began I decided to return to the circle so that I could help defend Agharta without having to join the army.”

Emily pointed out, “My brother is probably worried sick about both of us. Still, it’s great to
see you again, Sapphira.”

As Lily mentally noted that Sapphira’s name sounded a lot like Chuck’s late grandmother’s name, the fiery-haired Druid added, “I helped Lila convince our High Druid to come to your aid, because I thought there was a chance that Emily and Ruby would be among the defenders here. Lila was concerned for her half-deep elf friend Elisa, who you two seem to know.”

Haley nodded and replied, “Regardless of why you came, we are just grateful that you all showed up. My only question is what your forces are going to do now?”

Sapphira explained, “I assume that the High Druid is discussing that with Tanya Woodstock right now. She told us earlier that she will supply our might to any operation involving the defense of Agharta and the vicinity surrounding the capital. She would prefer not to have our warriors involved with missions that range too far away from Central Terranor.”

Lily and Haley both nodded, after the deaths of their feloid comrades, they were both just happy to be alive. More so than after most of their battles. Lily looked over and noticed that Liliana was now talking with Captain Joland. Major Woodstock was giving out orders to Captain Benson. Hitomi Winslow was coming their way with Alicia and Cyril Forrester in tow.

While Lila and Elisa were talking, Lily noticed Chuck making his way over to where Elena and Liliana were talking. Howard and Tala decided to stay where they were for the moment.

Haley told Lily, “Maybe we should follow our Sergeant? I wonder what he is going to say to the High Druid?”

Lily replied, “I will follow you if you want me to.” She noticed that Emily and Ruby were still talking with Sapphira.

Haley motioned for Lily to follow her. The half-light elf simply shrugged her shoulders and followed her friend over to where Chuck had now reached Liliana and Elena.

Elena turned over to see Chuck now standing mere feet from her. She asked, “Are you reporting in Sergeant?”

With Lily and Haley keeping a small amount of distance, Chuck replied, “...Yes, ma’am. We lost two Privates in the battle, Captain. However, the rest of my squad is still able to fight...”

Liliana looked Chuck over and then remarked, “I remember you. …You are Sheila’s son, aren’t you?”

Elena looked over at Chuck without saying anything. Chuck then responded, “Yes, that would be me...”

Liliana suddenly embraced Chuck and held the heavily surprised young man in her arms. She told him, as Elena backed up slightly, “Sheila Coril, your mother, was always close to my apprentice Lila, as you probably know. You may not have seen much of me growing up. Still, I heard plenty about you and Selina. Sheila never stopped giving Lila and I trouble about not coming to help Sapphire and Sasha...”

As Liliana released Chuck from her arms, Chuck told her, “My mother always said that your druids hid themselves away and allowed the rebels to win. Still, you are here now. I guess that that has to count for something.”

Liliana replied, “Truth be told, I don’t think my druids fighting on either side would have
changed the outcome of the Second Rebellion. You won’t like me saying this, but even I felt betrayed when I heard that the United Church had been lying about their god ever since we defeated the Order of Light. I did not help your grandmother and Kylana because I did not want to risk my life and my followers’ lives for a cause we did not believe in. Still, the DRA has wiped out the Western Circles of druids, the people I used to call my own over a century and a half ago. They have shown willingness to crush anyone in their path. I might have let Agharta fall to Mara Winslow. However, it will not let the city fall to the armies of a foreign aggressor. This time, all of Terranor is under threat and we will not stand idly by.”

Elena chimed in, “The High Druid has assured Major Woodstock and myself that her warriors will help keep our capital safe as best as they can. Especially now that they had foiled a DRA assault, they know they will not be spared if the enemy takes over Terranor.”

Liliana nodded and then finished, “Chuck, I will say this for Sapphire. She had to have died for what she believed in. Knowing her, I cannot imagine her dying any other way. My old friend from the First Rebellion, Austus Pelagi, has been stationed as the Terranoran military attaché in Fadalia for decades. I know that he still mourns Sasha Cordwin’s death at the hands of Mara Winslow. Still, he has told me that he had been working tirelessly alongside her husband Sugaru Zaki Winslow to convince the Fadalians to send military aid to Terranor. …My point is, we will stand together this time. Terranor will fall or prevail based on how well its peoples come together.”

Elena added, as Juliana walked over to her wife, “I hope that the Flame Duchess comes to realize what you have, High Druid. Thank you for your support. I think that Agharta will be far safer with you and your followers watching over the city’s outskirts. You sure were lucky to find that Mastodon herd on the way here, by the way.”

Liliana nodded as Chuck saluted Elena. Lily and Haley reflexively saluted their commanders as well.

By the time that night fell, the charred mess from the day’s battle had been partially cleaned up. News had come in over the radio that the Terranoran divisions to the west were starting to seal the breach in their lines. Lily went to sleep that night still feeling lucky to be alive. The biggest question still on her mind was where her unit would be deployed to next.
The Eastern Front

It was one week after the battle for the Aryso region had been won thanks to the timely intervention of the druids of the Central Circle. The Terranoran artillery units stationed in the area had been packed up and split up. Some of them were being sent to Agharta for likely redeployment to the Southern Front. Most of the big guns were being shipped to the Western Front, however. That was on account of it being much closer to Aryso.

As for the five Special Actions Platoons under the command of Major Taya Woodstock, they were currently being quartered in and around the town of Aryso. The elite units had received a few new reinforcements to replace the soldiers they had lost in the last battle. However, their redeployment orders had not yet come in. Presumably it was only a matter of time until the higher ups in Agharta decided to send the five platoons back into the action. The biggest question was where were they needed most? The DRA columns that had breached the Terranoran lines on the Western Front had been obliterated. That was, of course, thanks to the valiant efforts of the Special Actions Platoons and the artillery crews they had defended. Liliana DeepTree’s magically-enhanced cavalry charge had also played a big part in keeping Agharta safe for the moment. The druids had returned to their home forest to await further developments within days after the battle had been won.

Relatively early in the morning seven days after the successful defense of the hilltop artillery, Lily and Haley were walking down Aryso’s main street in their normal uniforms. Lily asked her friend, “Remind me again why we are going to the local post office?”

Haley replied, “Captain Joland gave me an order to meet her there this morning. She said she had something for me. I just thought you might want to tag along?”

Lily nodded and admitted, “I don’t have anything better to do. Besides, I will admit to some curiosity about what our fearless leader has for you.”

Haley rolled her lizard-like orange eyes and told Lily, “I assumed that it has to be the medal that you indirectly suggested I be awarded. Honestly, it can’t come soon enough. The locals here have certainly been giving me looks and shying away when I get close to them. Maybe if I am wearing a Terranoran Army medal, they will realize that I’m on their side?”

Lily sighed, she could not help but feel defensive on Haley’s behalf. She was also embarrassed that she had forgotten that Captain Joland had recommended Haley for a medal. She replied, “I am sorry that some folks don’t trust you, Hales. I may be an ex-convict. However, to most people I just look like a normal blonde half-light elf. Sure, some folks still don’t like light elves… see Tala, as much as I care about her. However, we are not at war with enemies led by light elves right now.”

Haley sighed a bit and told Lily, “You also have the advantage of good looks, even if you never thought much about it thanks to your unfortunate upbringing. Regardless, I don’t want to make you feel bad. You are a good friend, Lily.”

Lily simply nodded as the two Privates reached the Aryso Post Office. Haley held the door for Lily and the two young women entered the building. Inside, they saw Captain Joland standing with a small box in one hand. The rest of their detachment was also there.

Tala saw that Lily was with Haley and told her, “Oh good, you are here too!”
As Lily and Haley walked over to their squadmates, Captain Joland nodded and mentioned, “My wife is on the phone with her brother-in-law, Priest Sergeant Stanley Ewdrick, right now. He is based in Playamar currently along with most of the United Church’s militia. She is quite happy for you, Private Haley.”

Elena then opened the small box and took out a dark blue and white ribbon with a copper medal attached. The medal depicted the head of a unicorn with a pearlescent horn.

Elena explained, “The unicorn has been a Terranoran emblem ever since the fall of the Order of Light. The use of the symbol use survived the surrender of the old Domain and the birth of the current government. This medal is the Copper Unicorn, the first, and least, of three medals for exemplary military service awarded by the Domain of Terranor’s army. The two higher-ranking medals being the Silver Unicorn and then the Gold Unicorn.”

As Haley actually looked a tad nervous, Elena smiled and continued, “Enough of my lecturing. …Private Haley, please step forward.”

Haley did as she was told, with the help of light pushes from both Lily and Tala. Elena then stepped forward until she was right next to Haley. The young Captain finished, “Private Haley, I hereby award you the Copper Unicorn medal for your repeated displays of exemplary bravery in the heat of battle.”

Elena then carefully pinned the medal to Haley’s chest. She then stepped back and saluted the young Private. Lily was pretty sure that Haley was blushing. Of course, her red scales made that impossible to determine for sure.

Haley saluted Elena back and said, “Thank you, ma’am. I will do my best to live up this honor you have bestowed upon me.”

Elena seemed about to dismiss the six member-detachment when the door to the post officer was flung open. Everyone turned to see a panicked looking Juliana Carlton standing in the doorway with Emily Falchum not far behind her.

Elena asked her wife and Emily, “What’s going on?”

Juliana quickly replied, “Our redeployment orders have come in! A few DRA transports made it past out navy’s eastern fleet and are landing troops just south of Playamar Port! They are trying to open up an Eastern Front!”

Emily added, “Major Woodstock is far from happy about having to back up the UCG’s militia. However, command has decided that we are to board trains heading through Agharta to Playamar this afternoon.”

Juliana continued, “Elena, if Stanley and Lana could be in any danger, then you know I would go to Playamar regardless. Either way, we need to prepare to leave this town as soon as everyone is packed.”

Elena sighed a bit and nodded. She then ordered the six detachment members, “Go and get ready to move out! Juliana and I will go round up the rest of the platoon. We will try to meet up at the train station by noon. Understood?”

Elena’s subordinates all saluted her. Then, Emily mentioned, “I will go find Ruby and Emmet and help get Cerberus II ready to move out. With any luck, we should be in Playamar in two days tops.”
Chuck ordered his five subordinates, “You heard the Captain. We better get ready to move out with all deliberate speed. For at least half of us, this will be an especially important mission.”

After Elena, Juliana and Emily had left the post office, Howard pointed out, “The reputation of the UCG’s militia stands to gain a boost if they can hold Playamar Port, which has historically been a UCG stronghold, long enough for us to arrive.”

Tala gave Howard one of her light punches and exclaimed, “Howard, it’s also our hometown! We can’t those DRA bastards into our city! Lieutenant Carlton is not the only person here who has family there.”

Chuck nodded and then ordered, “We should waste no more time with idle talk. Everyone needs to return to their lodgings and pack up now!”

The six-member detachment split up and headed off to get their things all packed up and ready. They all managed to make it to Aryso’s train station well in advance of noon.

Two military transport trains soon arrived from Agharta to transport the five Special Actions Platoons to their new assignment. After the trains were fully loaded up, they quickly sped from Aryso to Agharta’s Trevelyan Station. There, they refueled and restocked their stores of supplies. They also picked up a few fresh recruits assigned for deployment on the Eastern Coast of Terranor.

The two trains sped through the night to reach the Eastern Coast the next day. The train crews knew that there would not be any DRA units able to effectively ambush them on the way to Playamar. They also knew that they needed to reach the coastal city as soon as they could.

Chuck expressed a degree of excitement at returning to the city where his grandmother had spent some of her formative years. Howard and Tala were more concerned about their home city now being a DRA target. Elisa was focused on making sure that the DRA was unable to advance deeper into Eastern Terranor, closer to Agharta. It was obvious by this point that the enemy knew that capturing the Terranoran capital would either win them the war, or at least severely cripple the Terranoran Army’s ability to coordinate resistance to their invasion. Haley had put her medal away in her pack. She did not feel the need to wear it on the train ride. She also wanted to keep her first military decoration safe, just in case.

While Juliana was primarily concerned about her big sister Lana Ewdrick and her husband Stanley being in danger from the DRA forces nearby Playamar, Elena seemed confident in their survivability. Lily could swear that she had heard the name “Lana Ewdrick” somewhere before she joined the military.

On the ride to Playamar, Lily and Haley also learned more about their commanding officers’ personal history before their participation in the Eulidian Civil War and later joining the Terranoran Army to help fight off the DRA. Elena Joland had indeed been the daughter of the Count General Charles Joland, the Eulidian war hero known as the “Slayer of False Gods” among his people. She had grown up after the Eulidian Empire’s fall in the small city that housed the Joland Family Manor. Her wife, who had been born as Juliana Rallstein, had been a childhood friend of hers. Juliana had been raised in the highly religious Rallstein family. She had wanted to become a priestess of the Church of Eulidia growing up. However, when both girls discovered their sexuality in their mid-teens, they were arrested during a police raid on a secret meeting spot for homosexuals. The Church of Eulidia had condemned homosexuals as being something they called “demons.” For centuries, they had used their influence on the Eulidian government to have anyone arrested for homosexuality executed. Elena’s father had intervened and used his influence to have his daughter and her friend exiled from Eulidia and sent to Terranor.
What upset Lily the most about the story was how Juliana’s own birth family had wanted to see her executed after her sexual orientation was revealed to them. Lily admitted that she was glad to have grown up in a society where her orientation was not a problem. That was one of the few things in her life she was grateful for. To her, having a family and then being disowned by them sounded like one of the few things worse than not having a family at all.

Elena and Juliana then went on to describe their moving to Agharta. Juliana talked about having walked into one of the United Church’s houses of worship in the Terranoran capital and meeting the young priest Stanley Ewdrick and his girlfriend Lady Lana Carlton of the Holy Order of Knights. She talked about how she had been able to convince Stanley to take her on as an apprentice and how Lana’s family had legally adopted her soon after that.

As for Elena, she had become a student at the Agharta Academy of Magic soon after moving to the metropolis. Elena’s magic, unlike the magic of most arcanists, came from calling upon spirits living in a dimension parallel to the material universe that Austean was a part of. The Academy of Magic was where Elena had met Ruby Benson and later Ruby’s friend Emily Falchum. By the time that the train was almost to Playamar’s Pelagi Station, Elena had mentioned something about a crazy adventure she and Juliana had gone on that had resulted in the two women admitting their feelings for each other. It had also resulted in Elena earning the title of “Flamehawk.” Much to Lily and Haley’s confusion, Elena said something about “Flamehawk” being a unique title given only to certain women from a certain supernatural quasi-bloodline.

When the trains pulled into Pelagi Station in the late afternoon, Juliana rushed off the train that had been carrying Flamehawk Squadron, among others. Elena was right behind her, as was most of the rest of the platoon. Major Woodstock did her best to organize the other troops under her command as they disembarked from the train. From what Lily could figure out, there were currently no Terranoran warships docked at Playamar Port. Those ships were all fighting the Draconic Reconquest Navy to the south. Hopefully, they would be able to prevent more enemy ships from showing up, whether they were warships or transports. Fortunately, there was no reason why the port’s defensive cannons should not be fully operational. The defenders would need them if any DRA ships tried to attack the harbor directly.

Chuck ordered his detachment to follow Juliana and Elena, while another Sergeant did his best to organize the rest of the platoon. The good news was that the DRA units to the south had not yet made an assault on Playamar’s walls. Elena was able to gather as much while following her wife.

It was not long until Juliana saw and then ran over to a light-skinned, blonde, human man wearing a heavily-armored UCG Sergeant’s uniform. He had a bastard sword, a heavy metal shield and a heavy revolver at his belt. The man was looking quite worried until he saw Juliana.

The man, who Lily assumed had to be Stanley Ewdrick, rushed over to Juliana. He then embraced his old apprentice. As Elena and the six-member detachment followed Juliana over to Stanley, Juliana told her old mentor, after disengaging their embrace, “We are here, Stanley. Five Elite platoons ready for action!”

Stanley nodded he then told Juliana, “That is good news…. Still, we have another problem.”

Elena quickly asked, “What might that be?”

Stanley responded, “Lana got permission to lead a raid on the enemy’s northern encampment yesterday. She told me to stay behind in case the enemy tried making a move while she was out. The survivors of the skirmish on our side came back to this city and told me that Lana
had gotten knocked out by an enemy dragon. …Juliana, I think she was captured!”

Lily could see the color draining out of Juliana’s face. Elena looked seriously concerned for her wife. She stepped forward and took Juliana’s hand.

It was in that moment that Lily realized something. Her memories finally snapped into place. Lana Carlton Ewdrick was the woman who had led the raid that had resulted in her arrest months ago.
The Dawn Raid

Lily, Haley and the rest of their detachment were all standing nearby Juliana Carlton, her brother-in-law Stanley Ewdrick and their Captain, Elena Joland. Lily had just realized that Juliana’s older sister, Lana Carlton Ewdrick, was the one responsible for the gang she had once run with being rounded up. More concerning at the moment was the fact that Lana was now most likely a prisoner of the DRA forces camped out just south of Playamar.

Juliana, whose face had just turned as white as a sheet, exclaimed, “If the enemy has Lana captured, then we have to go rescue her! I will go alone if I have to!”

Elena seemed to be deep in thought as she continued to tightly hold Juliana’s hand. Stanley told Juliana, “My father, the commander of the United Church’s militia, is aware of the situation. However, he did not want to risk more of his soldiers’ lives trying to raid the enemy’s northern camp again. However, now that your reinforcements have arrived, I think that we can try to get her back.”

As Juliana nodded enthusiastically, Elena sighed about as deeply and loudly as Lily had ever heard her sigh. The Captain of Flamehawk Squadron then explained, “I am up to lead some kind of rapid raid on their northern camp. Our biggest obstacle is not the DRA, however. It is our own Major. We all know how much she hates the UCG. She won’t want to risk any of the soldiers under her command in an impromptu mission try and rescue one of the United Church’s knights.”

Stanley and Juliana both looked furious. However, it was clear that their fury was not directed at Elena. Chuck then spoke up, saying, “With all due respect, Captain, I think that we need to try and convince her somehow. I am certainly not advocating going against direct orders. However, I don’t think we can afford to just assume that the operation will not be approved. Maybe we can couch the plan in some way so that Major Woodstock will feel comfortable with supporting it?”

Elena was deep in thought again. She admitted, “If Lana is being held in the enemy’s closest encampment, then they could transfer her further away from us soon. We will need to act fast and hope for the best. …I propose that if we are able to get approval for this operation, we raid the enemy’s camp at dawn. We will get in, cause as much chaos and damage as possible, try and to find and rescue Lana and then retreat back to this city.”

Suddenly, the assembled soldiers heard a woman’s voice asking, “Why are you all standing around? We need to report to our arranged quarters as soon as practical.”

Everyone turned to see that Hitomi Winslow was the source of the voice. Chuck’s hands briefly balled up into fists. However, he quickly relaxed them. Elena quickly told the Bakarian Heiress, “We have just learned that Juliana’s big sister was captured by the enemy recently. I apologize for the delay, but we will head to our quartering assignments shortly.”

Hitomi sighed and replied, “I know you, Elena. You want to rescue your sister-in-law, don’t you?”

Before Elena could reply to Hitomi, Juliana told Hitomi, “Lana’s family took me in when I had nobody expect for Elena I could count on. They adopted me without my even having to ask. I won’t her stay in the clutches of the enemy if I have anything to say about it.”

Rather than looking annoyed, Hitomi told Elena, “In that case, you should probably let me
speak with Major Woodstock. I think that she will listen to me more easily on this matter, seeing as though our mothers were close allies in the past.”

Everyone present looked taken aback. Elena stammered, “O…. Ok? Still, why would you help one of your family’s enemies?”

Hitomi rolled her eyes a bit and explained, “That war is over. It was over before anyone here was born. Besides, it is more to help you than anything, Elena. Despite your mother’s defection from Fadalia, the Zaki bloodline connects the two of us. We are family, Flamehawk.”

Howard gave Tala a minor look as she said, “Awwww.” Haley and Elisa seemed both pleased and surprised by Hitomi’s decision to back Elena up. Lily could not help but wonder two things. For one, what sorts of people was she connected to by blood? She knew that she had both human and light elven ancestry, yet she knew no members of her biological family. The more immediate concern on Lily’s mind was how Lana would react if she and Lily again. Lily wanted Lana to be rescued mainly because she respected and admired Lt. Carlton and wanted her adoptive sister to be safe. However, she was not looking forward to the possibility of having to explain herself to the woman who had been chiefly responsible for her arrest.

Stanley nodded and said, “I guess that it is settled then. I will go inform my father about your arrival. The rest of you better get to your quarters here so that you do not get into trouble.”

After the customary salutes were exchanged, Elena led the detachment back over to link up with the rest of Flamehawk Squadron. Juliana wanted to stay with Stanley. However, Elena insisted that she come with the rest of the unit.

The members of the five newly-arrived Special Actions Platoons marched over to the local military base. There, the regular soldiers were quartered. The commissioned officers, and some non-commissioned officers, were authorized to stay in a local hotel located less than a block from the base.

That evening, the entirety of Flamehawk Squadron was ordered to gather in one of the base’s larger indoor briefing rooms. Elena and Juliana were there along with Hitomi Winslow and her two mercenaries, the Forrester twins. Sergeant Emily Falchum was also present.

Elena began the briefing by explaining, “Lady Winslow and I were ultimately able to convince Major Woodstock to authorize a raid on the DRA’s northern camp tomorrow morning. I was placed in command of the operation. Her conditions were that, for the most part, only the 14th platoon would be participating. Also, Sergeant Falchum was to accompany us. She will be reporting back to Major Woodstock after the raid, regardless of how well or poorly it goes. Lady Winslow has not been given permission to participate directly. However, she has ordered Alicia and Cyril Forrester to lend their talents to the operation.”

Juliana added, “We will be using a unit of three military trucks and one half-track to transport our unit to the outskirts of the enemy camp. We hope to arrive there just as the sun comes up. Our soldiers will then begin our attack. We will try to sabotage as many enemy artillery units and supply caches as we can. We will also try to eliminate as many enemy soldiers as we can. We will split up into small groups once we are inside the camp and do our best to locate Lana and rescue her. If we cannot find her, then we will at least try to locate any intel on where she is now by whatever means necessary.”

Elena then finished, “We will need to retreat reasonably quickly after hopefully accomplishing our objectives. We cannot afford to get overwhelmed by DRA reinforcements from the south once they realize what is going on. Now, I want all of you to head off to bed now and get
as much sleep as you can. We will be waking everyone up early tomorrow morning for the raid. Keep in mind that Lana Ewdrick is a tall, muscular, human woman with straight orange hair that goes down to her neckline.”

Lily gulped slightly, she was more sure than ever now that the person her unit was to try and rescue was the woman who had been responsible for her arrest. Of course, if she had not been arrested, would she have ever met Haley, her first real friend? Lily briefly wondered if somehow her imprisonment had been a blessing in disguise. As much as she liked Tala, Elisa and the others, Haley was the one person she actually felt she could not live without.”

Juliana told the assembled soldiers, “You are all dismissed. Remember your orders and get some rest. You all will most likely sleep easier than I will tonight.”

Lily assumed that Juliana was expecting to have a hard time sleeping due to intense worry for her adoptive big sister. She briefly wished that she had a sister, or any family for that matter, to worry about in the first place.

Everyone present for the briefing went off to get some sleep. They knew that the next day would be important. They were going to raid an enemy camp with no real backup. This would certainly be a different sort of mission than the ones Lily and her comrades were used to.

The next morning, the members of Flamehawk Squadron, along with Emily, Alicia and Cyril, got up, got ready and then boarded their transports. With their headlights off in the early-morning gloom, the four vehicles made their way out of Playamar and began to drive down the coastal road leading south. It was not that long until the small convoy, with the half-track in the lead, went off-road and began to approach a large series of tents in the distance.

Lily’s detachment happened to be riding in the half-track along with Alicia and Cyril Forrester. Emily Falchum was on the machine gun, just in case. Haley took out her binoculars and scanned the enemy positions. Her eyes were well-suited to making out distant details in the dark. She told her comrades, “I see a couple of sniper towers. Those could prove problematic for us. I can also make out a trio of massive transport ships down the coast. I hope that they are not unloading even more enemy units.”

Lily suggested, “Maybe they do not want to risk sailing south and encountering our fleets?”

Tala added, “That makes sense. Still, I hope that our navy can spare some ships to sail up here soon. We can’t let the DRA capture Playamar. I’m not even saying that just because it’s my hometown.”

Elisa looked down her sniper rifle’s scope and told Cyril, “I think we can deal with any snipers on the towers once the raid begins. For now, the towers are empty. However, they might not stay that way for long.”

It was not long until the half-track and the three trucks stopped in some tall grass. They quickly disgorged the soldiers they were carrying. Emily stayed on the half-track’s machine gun. She was under orders from Major Woodstock not to move in and engage unless it was deemed absolutely necessary. However, Alicia and Cyril were not under those orders.”

Elena and Juliana led their twenty-four person force forward quietly through the tall grass until it came to an end. Then, the unit began to advance rapidly across the sandy plain as the sun began to come up in the distance.

Juliana sheathed her longsword in purple fire as Elena took to the sky on her flaming wings.
Chuck told his five subordinates, “We will have to split up once we get to the camp proper! We have to cover as much ground as possible!”

Lily readied herself to conjure her force shield as soon as the battle was joined. Tala did the same thing. Elisa and Cyril readied their sniper rifles, everyone else got their firearms ready. They knew that the DRA would soon realize that they were there.

Elena called down, “I see some ammunition caches down there. I think it’s time to cause some chaos!”

Juliana led the main charge on the ground as Elena detonated a raging Inferno Burst inside of the enemy camp. The blast of fire ignited a number of grenades and artillery shells. The chain reaction of explosions tore through the camp’s ammunition supplies. It also collapsed one of the two sniper towers. However, it also certainly had to have woken up any DRA soldiers in the camp who were not already awake.

Gunfire began to fly out from behind the northern tents of the camp as Juliana called down a column of purple flame on a large enemy tent, seeming to fry a number of enemies who had been inside of it.

As hostile soldiers began to emerge to engage the Terranoran force and an alarm siren could be heard going off, Lily and Tala conjured their force shields. The enemy had been caught off guard. However, now they were starting to gather their defenders. The battle had now begun in earnest.
Lily, Haley and the rest of their detachment were following Lieutenant Juliana Carlton in a rapid charge into the DRA camp where they believed Lana Carlton Ewdrick was being held prisoner. Set up on the sandy plains a short walk from the shoreline, the encampment had no walls. It was likely intended to be temporary anyways.

DRA infantry soldiers were starting to appear in uniform with weapons drawn. They were doing their best to form some kind of a frontline against the charging Terranoran elites. At the center of the DRA line a creature that looked like cross between a winged horse and a dragon of indeterminate species trotted out. Riding the strange beast was a DRA officer wearing heavy armor and carrying a sword and a revolver. The man’s red-scaled head was similarly to Haley’s in appearance. He had to be a half-flame dragon.

The crossbreed officer led his troops forward out of their camp to meet the Terranorans. However, two of them were downed by barrages of flaming force rockets from the airborne Elena. Juliana detonated a blast of sound and purple lighting under the dragon-horse. The blast dazed the beast, preventing it from charging.

Chuck shouted, “Cover me!” His body then took on a bright glow and he shot forward with his spiked chain ready. Lily tossed a sphere of compressed sound into a DRA rifleman taking aim at Chuck. Another soon fell to gunfire from Haley’s rifle. Chuck reached a trio of DRA soldiers and swept his spiked chain at them in a wide arc. The weapon crackled with electricity and ripped into the grunts. All three of them had their armor and guts brutally sliced open, something they did not survive.

Elisa did as she was ordered and sniped a DRA shotgunner, who was about to counterattack Chuck, with a bullet right through the eye slit in his helmet. As that enemy collapsed, Alicia unloaded bullets from her two pistols into the enemy commander. His armor and hide withstood the barrage. However, as he took aim at Alicia with his revolver, Cyril finished him with a headshot from his sniper rifle.

The draconic horse recovered from its dazed state and reared up angrily. However, the creature’s vulnerable underbelly was sliced through by a ray of purple light fired off by Juliana via her longsword.

As the dragon-horse collapsed dead, Elena called down, “Split up and search the camp! Keep your eyes peeled for DRA troops. They will hopefully be scattered while they try to regroup for another attack.”

The remaining few DRA soldiers who had followed the half-dragon officer were beginning to fall back into the camp. Juliana charged up her body with purple fire and shot forward. Her blade impaled one retreating enemy in the back, killing him instantly.

As Howard and Tala regrouped with Chuck, Haley and Lily also continued their advance. Chuck ordered, “You all heard our Captain. Howard, Tala, you two are with me. Elisa, stay with Cyril and keep an eye out for any enemies you can snipe, especially hostile snipers. Haley, Lily, go together and see what you can find. We will see if we can regroup just past the area Captain Joland blew to bits. Watch out for the flames..”

Howard mentioned, “The fire won’t be much of an issue for Haley and I. Still, it would be wise for us all to avoid the remains of that ammo dump.”
Chuck then quickly led Howard and Tala into the camp. Haley reloaded her rifle as Lily said, “I’ll follow you.”

Haley nodded and told Lily, as the duo entered into the camp, “Keep your eyes peeled and be careful of tight corners. I wish that I had a shotgun right now.”

Haley then carefully led Lily into the enemy camp. As the sounds of combat could be heard all around them, they saw a pair of DRA soldiers fleeing away from the fighting. Lily reflexively sent a vertical sound wave flying into the back of one enemy. The pulse sliced into the back of her spine, killing her practically on impact.

The second DRA soldiers heard his comrade’s death scream and quickly turned around. However, as he aimed his rifle, Haley opened fire on him with three rapid shots. The armored figure staggered back after the bullets hit home. He collapsed dead as Haley reloaded her firearm with a fresh clip.

Lily could not help but say to Haley, “For someone as compassionate as you are, you can be quite the killing machine sometimes.”

Haley simply retorted, “It’s not like you haven’t been taking down DRA troops left and right as well. I even saw you take out a swamp dragon back when we were nearby Aryso.”

Lily just nodded. Even she had been surprised at how easily she had adapted to the life of a soldier. Maybe it had been subconscious pressure to present herself worthy of membership in her elite unit? Lily quickly refocused herself and drew her pistol. She knew that now was not the time for introspection. She then followed Haley forward.

As Lily followed Haley through the DRA camp, they looked through multiple unoccupied tents. The duo seemed to have avoided the main fighting for the most part since entering the encampment. Captain Joland was still flying above the battle providing arcane air support to her subordinates using offensive spells.

Lily was starting to wonder if it would soon be time for them to retreat and meet up with their allies. They had searched much of the camp and come up empty. Suddenly, Haley held up a hand and quietly told Lily, “I hear voices nearby. They sound somewhat panicked. Be ready for a fight.”

Lily nodded and renewed her force shield. Haley put away her rifle and drew her twin kukris. The two women snuck forward and took cover behind a large supply crate.

Without much warning, Haley lunged out from behind the crate. Four DRA troops saw her and went for their weapons. Lily summoned up a reverberating beam of sound and fired it into two DRA soldiers from behind Haley. The two grunts were practically disintegrated as Haley threw herself at the third enemy. The final DRA soldier ran inside the nearest tent.

The DRA soldier who Haley was attacking raised up her hands in a vain attempt to defend herself. However, Haley’s blades and bite tore into her with little effort.

Haley wasted no time in pursuing the final enemy into the nearby large tent. Lily quickly followed her friend with her sidearm drawn.

Inside of the tent Lily and Haley found the DRA soldier drawing her own pistol. They also saw a tall case containing a long, two-handed warhammer, an unloaded Vargas Technologies Portable Machine Gun and a semi-automatic pistol of the same model as Lily’s. More importantly,
they saw a light-skinned human woman with orange hair wearing a light blue shirt and black pants with brown boots. She looked beaten up and bruised, some of her skin was even slightly charred. The woman was gagged with a tight piece of white cloth. She was standing directly in front of a metal pole. Her hands were manacled behind the pole and her legs were shackled.

The DRA grunt saw Haley charging into the tent. She seemed unsure of whether to shoot the prisoner, or shoot at the incoming half-dragon. That indecisiveness cost the soldier her life. Haley closed the gap and sliced the woman’s neck open with a kukri.

Haley quickly told Lily, “That has to be Lana Ewdrick. I will see if I can find the keys and free her. You keep watch!”

Lily saluted Haley and then peered outside the tent, keeping watch as best as she could. In just a couple of minutes, Lily heard the sound of metal cuffs being unlocked and a female voice saying, “Thank you, Private. I take it that Juliana is behind this rescue. You don’t look like a UCG militia member.”

Haley replied, “You are correct, ma’am. Now, let me see if I can get this case open.”

Lana replied, “Thank you again. I can walk, but I am not in the best shape. You should be warned that this camp is commanded by an enemy flame dragon. If you have not encountered him yet, then he will certainly be up to something.”

Lily looked inside to see Haley opening the case and Lana doing her best to retrieve her weapons. Lana continued, “I will have to get a new uniform after this. I don’t know where the bastards took my armor. Anyway, thank you, Haley. We should be heading out now.”

Haley looked clearly surprised and asked Lana, “You know my name?”

Lana chuckled a bit and replied, “Juliana mentioned you to me over the phone once because Elena recommended you for a medal. …I think I recognize your blonde comrade from somewhere… I’m not sure where…”

Haley looked surprised again as Lily decided there was no point in obfuscation. She said, “Yeah, last time we met, you knocked me out with that maul of yours. Still, we are here to rescue you and we need to get going. I think I hear footsteps coming our way fast!”

Lana seemed to have a flash of memory and replied, “You were that gang sorceress. I guess they will let anyone into the regular army these days. Still, you are right about us getting out of here before more enemies show up.”

Haley gave Lily a look of some kind. She simply muttered, possibly amused, possibly annoyed, “What a coincidence…” The half-dragoness then led Lily and Lana out of the tent.

A unit of four DRA soldiers was spotted charging right for the three women. Lily took aim with her sidearm as Haley lunged forward and roasted three enemies with her flaming breath. The final foe stopped her advance briefly in shock. This allowed Lily to quickly gun her down with her pistol.

As Lily reloaded, Haley called out, “We need to get to the rendezvous point! Then, we can fall back as a larger group!”

Lily and Lana followed Haley back through the camp towards the smoke from the ammo dump that Elena had destroyed. On the way, they only encountered one more DRA grunt, who Lily made short work of with her force rockets.
When the three women reached the northern edge of the camp, they regrouped with their allies. Juliana saw her older sister with Lily and Haley and rushed to embrace her. She then channeled a large pulse of purple light to heal Lana’s torture-induced wounds.

As the rest of Flamehawk Squadron was regrouping, Elena shouted from above, “Enemies are advancing on the camp from the south! …Incoming!”

A flame dragon the size of a truck flew over Elena and landed in front of the platoon, blocking their way to their transport trucks. The mighty reptilian inhaled as around ten DRA troops flanked around the tents to take up positions nearby him.

Elena landed and projected a wall of fire in front of her. The energy wall protected her and her subordinates from the dragons blazing breath attack. However, the flaming wall was consumed in the process. The infantry soldiers on both sides opened fire as Juliana ordered, “Forward! We cannot let them catch us in a pincer!”

Tala summoned up a javelin of ice and tossed it into the flame dragon’s shoulder. The creature recoiled in pain. That attack gave Juliana an opening to stretch out her hand and caused purple ice crystals to form around him, injuring him further.

Lily snapped fingers on both of her hands to stun two DRA soldiers with pulses of sound, making them easy targets for allied gunfire. Chuck fired a crackling beam of electricity into the flame dragon as Elisa and Cyril opened fire on him with their sniper rifles.

The dragon was still standing, as the two groups of soldiers closed in, he tossed a sphere of fire at Tala from one of his claws, which shattered her force shield. However, Howard stood in front of her with his heavy shield out. He successfully protected his friend from enemy fire that had been intended to finish her off.

Haley focused on taking down some of the DRA infantry with her rifle, she nailed one foe in the head with a lucky shot.

As the flame dragon prepared to unleash his fire breath again, he was raked from behind by machine gun fire. The half-track was advancing rapidly on the skirmish with Emily manning its gun. The trio of military trucks were right behind the armored vehicle.

Alicia used her dual pistols to drop a pair of DRA riflemen. As she fell back to reload, Elena raised up a hand and closed her fist. Most of her soldiers began to move more quickly as a magical light washed over them.

Tala saw the flame dragon turning to unleash his breath attack on the half-track and the trucks. If he succeeded, he would likely take away the Terranoran troops’ means of escape. She fired off a beam of cold energy into the dragons, lower chest as bullets bombarded him from both sides.

The mighty drake finally gave up the ghost and collapsed from Tala’s freezing beam. The few remaining DRA soldiers were quickly outflanked and torn to pieces by the Terranoran elites.

As the DRA’s reinforcements were likely still on their way, the members of Flamehawk Squadron boarded their trucks and half-track. Alicia, Cyril and the newly-rescued Lana Ewdrick were all with them. The four vehicles drove north back to Playamar as the sun continued to rise higher in the sky. The raid had been a brilliant success. Lana had been rescued and real damage had been done to the DRA forces to the direct south of Playamar.

The trucks and half-track made it back to Playamar before noon. Stanley and Lana were
reunited at the local military base. The soldiers who had participated in the dawn raid were allowed to go and get some rest. However, they were also informed that, even with their forces reduced, the DRA was likely to mount their planned offensive against Playamar in the near future.
Defending Playamar

Only two days had passed since the successful dawn raid on the northern DRA camp just down the coast from Playamar Port. Juliana had been very pleased with how the operation had gone. Her older sister had been rescued from DRA custody and the invaders in the region had been dealt a significant blow in the process. Elena had expressed sincere gratitude towards Lady Hitomi Winslow for her assistance in convincing Major Woodstock to approve the mission. As for Lana herself, she was able to acquire a new armored uniform and knight’s insignia after returning to Playamar. Thankfully for Lily, Lana had not confronted her again since the rescue. She probably had bigger things to worry about than bothering the former criminal.

Now, two mornings after returning from their raid, Flamehawk Squadron was gathered in the same briefing room from before. Captain Joland was looking at a war table with a detailed map of the region atop it. Lieutenant Carlton was standing beside her.

Elena briefly looked over her subordinates and began, “We have a new assignment. This time, it comes directly from Major Woodstock.”

Elena then pointed to a marked spot on the map located just to the southwest of Playamar. She explained, “I asked all of you to come here with your combat gear ready because we are deploying right after this briefing. The DRA forces to the south of here have been confirmed to be marching towards the city as we speak. Major Woodstock has taken command of our main force. She has promised to do her best to ensure that the DRA is unable to advance into the city proper. As for our job, the UCG’s militia had been working on building a small series of fortifications and trenches just to the city’s southwest. Major Woodstock has decided that, after our earlier success, we should be the ones manning the position.”

Chuck asked his Captain, “Ma’am, why do we need to be stationed in some side position? This won’t help keep the city proper safe… will it?”

Juliana replied, “Our plan is to attack the enemy assault force from cover using the side position. That way, once the DRA force is close enough to Playamar, they will take fire from two angles, instead of one. We are hoping to divide their focus and their fire.”

Elena pointed out, “We will be protecting a series of light cannons and machine guns positioned along the trenches and cover barricades. It will be up to me to decide when we open fire. The position is camouflaged well enough that we are hoping to remain hidden from the enemy until the head of their formation is past us. Also, Stanley and Lana Ewdrick have elected to fight alongside us in this battle. Eric Ewdrick, Stanley’s father and the head of the UCG’s militia will be commanding his main force from inside the city.”

Juliana asked, “Are there any other questions? We need to deploy as quickly as possible.”

Lily looked around to see that nobody else in the platoon had any particular questions. Like her comrades, she had all of her combat gear ready. She was about as ready to deploy as she ever was. By now, the half-light elf woman had gotten more and more used to lethal combat. The “rhythm” of it was imprinted in her mind now. Of course, unlike most of the other soldiers in her unit, she was less interested in fighting for the Domain of Terranor and more interested in fighting for herself and for her friends.

Soon, Lily followed her comrades out of the briefing room and out into the motor pool of the Playamar base. There, Stanley and Lana Ewdrick were waiting for them in their full uniforms.
They also looked ready for action and were carrying all of their weapons. Also waiting was a group of four military trucks. Elena ordered her soldiers onto the vehicles, which began their drive out of the city once they were fully loaded.

It was not long until the quartet of trucks parked behind a small series of light fortifications defended by a trench line. Camo nets were hung above and around the position. The hope was that the advancing DRA soldiers would not see the flanking positions until they were fired upon by the side unit. As promised, a series of light cannons and machine guns were strategically positioned and aimed out onto the coastal plains. The members of Flamehawk Squadron took up their positions in the trench line and around the light cannons. Some soldiers got ready to man the machine guns, others checked their firearms and made sure they were loaded, cleaned and ready.

Chuck led his detachment into the southern end of the trench. Haley got out her binoculars and looked out onto the coastal plains. Elisa looked down the scope of her sniper rifle. Lily looked around and noticed that Elena was doing her best to get her other soldiers into position in the trench and behind cover nearby the light cannons.

As Haley and Elisa did their best to scan the horizon for enemies, Chuck reminded his soldiers, “Remember, team, we should only open fire once Captain Joland gives the order. We don’t want the DRA formation to notice our position here until we fire on them.”

Haley nodded as Lily looked over at her. The half-dragon soldier then reported, “I see an enemy column coming closer. There are probably at least a few hundred infantry units in their force. Two waves of half-tracks are leading the assault. I see some of those dragon-horse creatures flying above the main formation, they are being ridden by humanoid soldiers.”

Elisa nodded and added, “I can confirm the Private’s findings. They are advancing right for the city’s south gate. That should be where Major Woodstock’s elites and the UCG Militia will be entrenched and waiting.”

Howard mentioned, “I will confess to being a bit worried that our Major will view the militia soldiers as disposable, due to their allegiance to the United Church. We all know how she feels about the institution.”

As Tala nodded her agreement, Chuck admitted, “I feel the same way, Corporal. I wonder if Lieutenant Carlton’s older sister and her husband wanted to fight alongside our platoon in part because they did not want to be subject to a Woodstock’s command?”

Haley pointed out, “I heard from Lieutenant Carlton that Stanley and Lana had fought alongside Tanya Woodstock against the House Arthus’s soldiers once back when she was a Captain. From what I was told, she was not exactly pleasant to them, even though they were fighting the same enemies.”

Lily rolled her eyes and said, “I can’t help but feel like the whole United Church versus Woodstock supporters conflict is getting a bit ‘long in the tooth.’ I think we all have a dragon-sized problem to deal with right now. That should seriously be prioritized over this bickering over a war that was fought before any of us were born.”

Haley smiled, while still looking through her binoculars, and told Lily, “Well said. We have to remember what Liliana DeepTree said before. Honestly, I am not even from Terranor and I am invested in this fight. …To be fair, the DRA has almost certainly overrun my hometown. I don’t intend to stop fighting until the DRA is brought down and Scralville is liberated.”

Before anyone could respond to Haley’s statement, Elisa called out, “The enemy column is
closing in fast! We should be quiet and try to avoid detection until the half-tracks are past us.”

Chuck nodded and readied his rifle. The rest of the detachment was quiet as the enemy main force came into view.

Suddenly, the sound of heavy artillery going off came from the direction of Playamar. Within moments, artillery shells impacted the ground around the, rapidly advancing DRA column. One shell landed in a cluster of humanoid soldiers, blowing them all away. One shell landed on top of a half track and blew it to pieces. Lily nervously noticed that there were four giants with heads like Haley’s marching near the front of the DRA formation. They were all carrying machine guns and greatswords, like the giants they had battled in Ouktai. These towering warriors were clearly descended from flame dragons, not forest dragons. Fire-based attacks would not do much, if any, damage to them.

Now, thundering sounds could be heard in the distance as DRA heavy cannons went off far behind the advancing main force. The shells impacted in a wide spread close to the southern defenses of Playamar Port.

For an indeterminate amount of time, both sides traded heavy artillery fire. Eventually the two waves of half-tracks made their way past the camouflaged position at a distance of about four-hundred feet.

A massive inferno burst suddenly took out two of the DRA half-tracks. Realizing that Captain Joland had given the order to open fire via her spell, the machine guns and light cannons opened fire on the surprised DRA force. Haley jumped onto the nearest machine gun turret and opened fire on the DRA infantry just behind the half-tracks. Another pair of DRA armored vehicles went up in flames thanks to shells from the light cannons.

Lily and Tala conjured their force shields as Elisa downed a DRA arcanist with a quick headshot. Chuck destroyed a half-track’s machine gun turret with another one of his flaming meteors. Howard summoned up a pair of spheres of purple fire which then streaked forward, blasting away the DRA infantry with smaller pulses of purple light.

The DRA units at the front of their column were now taking heavy fire from the men and women of Flamehawk Squadron. Juliana pointed her sword at a half-track, causing its treads to freeze up as purple crystals covered them. Lana opened fire with her portable machine gun as Stanley brought a raging column of purple flames down on another DRA half-track, blowing it to pieces.

Now, some of the DRA’s soldiers were rapidly advancing towards the platoon’s position. Lily fired off a massive beam of sound, which tore into at least four enemy soldiers. Tala conjured an icy javelin and tossed it into the shoulder of the closest dragon-giant. As the giant turned to bring his machine gun to bear on the detachment, a light cannon shell struck him in the chest and blew it right open.

As the giant collapsed, Haley continued to open fire with her machine gun. Now, not only were at least thirty DRA soldiers rushing at Flamehawk Squadron, so were the flying cavalry units the DRA had brought with them.

A ray of lightning from Elena struck one of the dragon-horses, sending it and its rider crashing out of the sky. As the main DRA force continued to advance, they began to take fire from the primary cluster of Terranoran defenders.

As a bullet bounced off of her force shield, Lily saw two of the DRA’s airborne cavalry
units coming towards her and Tala fast. She smiled briefly and summoned up a wave of force that knocked one of the steed-rider pairs out of the sky. Tala fired an icy beam at the other incoming dragon-horse. The beast tried to evade. However, one of its wings was struck by the ray. Unable to fly properly, the steed tumbled out of the sky with its rider.

Howard used a well-aimed blast of sound and purple lighting to knock two more enemy air cavalry units out of the sky. Chuck took down one more with a crackling ray of electricity.

As some of the charging DRA troops neared the trench, Elena boiled at least eight of them with an immense wave of superheated steam from her hands. Elisa and Haley were remaining focused on the enemies on the ground.

The Terranoran light cannons fired again, one shell struck an advancing DRA giant in the head, killing her on impact. The guns also took down two more half-tracks. The DRA’s artillery shells were impacting all around the battlefield. However, at their current range, their accuracy was low enough that the heavy cannons were not providing much help to their main column. They were clearly not as well-designed as Vargas Technologies’ artillery pieces.

The Terranoran heavy cannons based inside of Playamar were now firing shells well over the DRA column. It was clear to Lily that they were hoping to hit the enemy batteries in the distance using their superior range. As for the main DRA column, it continued to advance. However, most of its armored vehicles had been destroyed by cannon fire and spells. The infantry units were becoming more and more vulnerable and their numbers were also being depleted rapidly.

Suddenly, Elisa called out, “I see two forest dragons. One of them is heading for the city, the other one is headed our way!”

As the entrenched members of Flamehawk Squadron had mostly dealt with the incoming enemy air cavalry, they saw the pair of light green dragons flying over the battlefield. Their long spine-crests and dinosaur-like heads making them quite distinct. They were each slightly larger than full-grown mastodons.

As one of the flying reptilians dived down towards the Terranoran front line, the other closed in on the defenses Flamehawk Squadron was holding. Chuck took aim at the dragon with his rifle and ordered, “Focus your fire on that dragon!”

Elisa shouted, “Or duck for cover!”

The forest dragon landed in front of the trench line and immediately breathed out a blast of acidic gas from her mouth. The spread destroyed a number of machine gun turrets and ate through other cover positions. Lily and Tala had their force shields shattered. Chuck, Elisa and Haley had all narrowly managed to duck for cover, while Howard had protected himself with a field of purple flame.

Lily instinctively unloaded her pistol into the dragon. Haley stood up and countered with her own fiery breath. Howard also discharged his flame breath into the enemy dragon. Tala tossed a sphere of cold into the creature.

Lily looked over to see Juliana, Stanley and Lana trying to heal allied soldiers injured by the blast of acidic gas. Elena ignited her flaming wings and shot up into the air.

The forest dragon saw Elena leaping up into the air as she took a bullet to the chest from Elisa. The dragon grabbed Elena’s legs with one of her claws. However, a light cannon shell struck
her right in the stomach, distracting and weakening her.

Elena made a quick arcane gesture, causing her body to glow with light. She slipped out of the dragon’s claw and then saw one of the DRA’s air cavalry units coming right for her with a greatsword ready to swing.

Chuck shouted, “Cover our Captain!” He leapt out of the trench and swung his spiked chain at one of the dragon’s legs while channeling lightning through it.

A swarm of bullets pelleted the forest dragon as Elena’s forearms sparked with lightning. She then launched the arc of electricity from her arms. The spell fried both the air cavalry soldier and his mount. It also finished off the mighty forest dragon. She finally collapsed to the ground, dead from her multitude of injuries.

Lily reloaded her pistol and surveyed the battlefield. The other forest dragon was advancing while taking heavy fire from the main Terranoran force. The creature exhaled an immense blast of acidic gas. However, a rapidly-conjured wall of ice blocked the gas from reaching the Terranoran frontline. Lily had a feeling that Ruby Benson had been responsible for the icy wall.

Elena quickly landed in the trench next to Juliana, she was breathing heavily from the exertion of all the spells she had cast in rapid succession.

Elisa suddenly called out, “Look at that!”

Lily turned to see that a lucky shot from a light cannon had blasted the other forest dragon’s throat open, he crumpled to the ground in a big heap in front of the Terranoran frontlines.

Haley, who was now wielding her semi-automatic rifle, called out, “The enemy is starting to retreat!”

Sure enough, the DRA forces were now falling back towards their camps to the south. Only one of the enemy giants still stood and even she was falling back. Lily had started to realize that when dragons fought alongside humanoid DRA infantry, the deaths of all such creatures would often panic the grunts. Something similar had happened when the druidic warriors had slain the lead swamp dragon back during the battle for the Aryso region.

Chuck, who was already standing outside of the trench called out, “Let’s finish this! Everyone forward!”

With no counteracting orders from their officers, the members of Flamehawk Squadron surged out of their trench to pursue the fleeing DRA units. The light cannons’ gunners stayed behind with a few guards to man their artillery pieces. However, with the arcanists in the rear, the 14th Special Actions Platoon rushed forward to pursue their retreating enemies. Major Woodstock was also starting to lead her forces, and the UCG’s militia, forward. It was time to conclude the battle for Playamar. The enemy needed to be routed and their artillery needed to be destroyed, or seized.
Lily was following her comrades out onto the coastal plains directly to the south of Playamar Port. The DRA forces sent to assault the city had been forced to retreat thanks in major part to Flamehawk Squadron having outmaneuvered them. The surprise attack from the west had proven instrumental in driving the invaders away from the coastal city. The DRA had likely been hoping that Playamar would be almost undefended. However, the combined forces of the UCG militia and the five Special Actions Platoons had repelled the enemy force.

Now, the surviving DRA infantry, vehicles and one half-flame dragon giant were falling back towards their camps to the south. The main threat to the advancing Terranoran soldiers was now the enemy’s heavy artillery. The big guns were still covering their retreating troops. The Terranoran artillery batteries in Playamar were still firing on the enemy camps. The gunners were most likely hoping to hit enemy heavy cannons, or even better, one of their stashes of explosive shells.

Lily was advancing next to Tala as Chuck led the way with his spiked chain drawn. Haley and Elisa were using their rifles to pick off retreating hostile infantry. Howard had fallen back a bit to help with healing. The majority of Flamehawk Squadron was still advancing behind the detachment. Captain Joland was with them. This time, she was leading from the rear. Her recent casting of a series of powerful spells in a short span of time looked to have exhausted her.

Tala sighted her bolt-action rifle and picked off a DRA grunt who had been lagging behind his fellows. She readied her weapon for another shot, shouting, “That’s right, run! Stay away from my hometown!”

Lily rolled her eyes slightly. Still, she had never seen Tala so invested in combat. She decided not to challenge her deep elf friend’s anger. She then snapped fingers on both of her hands, causing sonic pulses to erupt and stun two DRA soldiers near the back of the retreating mass. Haley and Elisa gunned down those two enemies rapidly, knowing how to follow up that spell by now.

The remaining enemy giant was suddenly struck in the back of the neck by a Terranoran light cannon shell. The round from the field gun blew the towering draconic humanoid’s head clean off of their body. Lily winced at the brutal display. However, she kept advancing behind her allies. She had seen, and caused, plenty of gory deaths in her time in the military by now.

Chuck scorched two DRA soldiers with twin beams of fire he launched from one of his hands. In the distance, Major Woodstock’s main force was closing in. They would likely link up with Flamehawk Squadron soon enough.

What was left of the DRA force was becoming less and less organized. Very few of their soldiers were stopping their retreat to try and cover their allies. This lack of organization and discipline, now that things had turned against them, reinforced the idea that most of the humanoid DRA soldiers were not valued by their masters. They were poorly trained, poorly equipped and intended to overwhelm their enemies by sheer numbers, not because they were superior soldiers. Lily did not feel sorry for her enemies, it was either their lives, or the lives of her and her comrades. She knew that she was fighting for her own survival and that of her small circle of friends. Whatever led to her platoon’s survival was worth it to her.

Lily soon came to realize that she was starting to fall behind her comrades. Tala was advancing more quickly than usual due to her anger at her home city having been attacked. The
rest of the platoon was starting to catch up with Lily. However, suddenly, a series of enemy artillery shells streaked across the sky. The members of Flamehawk Squadron scattered to try avoid the incoming fire. Lily ran to the side, away from her comrades. However, an enemy shell struck the earth not far behind her. The impact sent shrapnel and debris flying towards her.

Lily’s force shield was shattered by the blast. She stumbled forward and prepared to conjure up a new force shield. She looked around, somewhat disoriented, and was not sure where her comrades were now. Her ears were ringing from the sound of the shell landing behind her. As Lily tried to get a hold of herself, two more shells landed farther away from her. Thankfully, she was outside of the blast radius of the two strikes.

Now quite dazed, Lily tried once again to cast her defensive spell. However, the last enemy shell in the salvo struck not far in front of her. A hunk of earth flew towards Lily and struck her right in the abdomen. The half-light elf woman fell to the ground clutching her stomach. Lily blacked out, thinking, as she lost consciousness, “Haley, Tala, Elisa, where are you guys?”

Slowly, Lily’s eyes opened. She had no idea how much time had passed. However, she saw that the sky was still light and she still felt pain in her stomach. As Lily tried to haul herself to her feet, she heard an unfamiliar female voice saying, “You are up, great! I was really worried about you miss.”

Lily rubbed her eyes and then looked over to see what appeared to be a human girl no older than twelve years old. The girl had red long, straight, red hair and was wearing a silver and red casual dress that went from her neck down to just below her knees. She carried no weapons, not that Lily would expect a child to have them.

As Lily managed to get to her feet, she asked the young girl, while the sounds of battle could be heard in the distance, “What are you doing out here, kid? This is battlefield, you know?”

The girl replied, “I wanted to help fight for Terranor… I managed to help wake you up at least, I think. Still, I can tell that you might need some healing soon.”

Lily sighed and asked the girl, “I am not sure how exactly you expected to help fight? Where are your parents? If you have any, I can’t imagine them letting you come out here, especially alone. Also, what’s your name?”

The girl replied, “My mom is somewhere far away. I honestly snuck out to come here. As for my father, I never knew him. As for my name, it’s Layla… Layla Duke. What’s your name?”

Lily looked around and saw smoke in the distance. She sighed deeply and told Layla, “My name is Lily, just Lily. Look, I have to find my unit and regroup with them. For all I know, they think that I’m dead. You can come with me, but only because there is nobody else to watch out for you out here. Still, in all seriousness, how did you think you could help us fight?”

Layla simply smiled widely, she then told Lily, “Thanks for letting me come with you. I will help you find your buddies.”

Lily could not help but still feel confused about why Layla was on the battlefield. Also, how had the girl found the unconscious Lily in the first place? She also knew she was not feeling her best, she needed to find a chaplain or healer soon, while she could still walk. Despite her current situation, Lily was determined to reunite with her platoon. She still wanted to keep her promise to Haley. She also wanted to make sure that her friends were ok, especially Haley.

Lily and Layla made their way towards the smoke in the distance. By now, there was no
more artillery fire. It did not take Lily very long to realize that the smoke was coming from the DRA camps to the south. She also realized that she could make out some transport ships sailing away. It seemed like the enemy had been forced to retreat.

Lily and Layla soon approached a large series of boulders lying on the plains. Layla tapped on one of Lily’s legs and quietly told her, “I think I hear voices behind those boulders.”

Lily, who’s stomach was still hurting, crouched down next to Layla and listened as carefully as she could. She still realized that the girl was right.

One voice said, “The ships are leaving without us! We are stranded here!”

Another voice asked, “Should we just find a Terranoran unit and surrender to them?”

A third voice responded, “No! We just need to see if we can find any allies to link up with and a radio. We can try to contact some force in Ruvia and try to meet up with them. I heard just yesterday that nearly the entire peninsula is under our control now.”

A fourth voice admitted, “You are the boss, Sergeant. I guess we should head south around the camps.”

A unit of ten DRA infantry soldiers emerged from behind the boulders. They were most likely stragglers who had escaped the battle when it had turned against their side. One of them saw Lily before she could try ducking to the ground. She called out, “An enemy soldier!”

Lily conjured a force shield and told Layla, “Get behind me, kid!” She knew that she was likely going to die here. Still, she was not going to go down without a fight.

As enemy gunfire streaked past Lily and bounced off of her force shield, Layla shouted, “No, you get behind me!”

Layla charged forward as the DRA soldiers looked down at her, clearly confused. She then fell to her knees as her body was consumed by pure energy.

Lily tossed a ball of sound into the nearest DRA rifleman, tearing into his stomach. She then looked down at Layla and gasped. Suddenly, she realized that the child she had been with was not actually human.

Now standing proudly in front of Lily now was a red-scaled horned, winged reptile slightly larger than a horse, a flame dragon. Bullets had minimal effect on Layla’s scaly hide as she rushed forward on her rear legs. She inhaled and fire gathered in her toothy mouth.

One of the DRA troops called out, “Enemy dragon!”

Lily realized that Haley was descended from a creature such as the one now defending her. She instinctively unloaded her pistol into another DRA grunt as Layla unleashed her flaming breath on the enemy squad.

The spread of raging fire incinerated six of the eight surviving DRA soldiers. The final two briefly looked to each other and then turned and ran away as fast as they could.

Suddenly, like a bolt from the blue, a flaming streak came crashing out of the sky. A small explosion of fire impacted between the final two DRA soldiers and charred them to crisps.

Lily looked past Layla and saw Captain Elena Joland standing in front of her and the dragoness.
Elena smiled at Lily and said, “I finally found you, Lily. Haley will be pleased. She had been worried sick about you, as has Tala.”

Layla told Elena, “So, you are the one they call the Flamehawk? Your friend Lily here is in need of help. She has been injured.”

Elena simply nodded and told Lily, “You can rest here, Private. The rest of the unit should be on their way. I had taken to the sky to search for you at your detachment’s request. Now, how exactly did you find a friendly flame dragon?”

Lily was just relieved to see her commanding officer again. She felt like she would actually hug Elena if she came any closer. She replied, “Well, ma’am, she was pretending to be a human child. She managed to wake me up in that guise and I decided to let her follow me to try and regroup with you all, since I did not want to leave her alone.” Lily knew all too well what it was like to be a lonely child. She wondered if that had influenced her decision to let Layla follow her.

Elena looked Layla over and said, “Well, she is sort of, kind of a child. She’s still quite young for a flame dragon judging by her size. Still, such creatures possess strong minds and combat-ready bodies even when they are the equivalent of being pre-teenagers.”

Lily was suddenly moderately concerned that some of the dragons her unit had fought before could have been effectively children. Still, maybe different rules really did apply to the sentient reptiles?

Layla mentioned, “I see some people headed this way. I think that they are your friends, judging by their uniforms. And yes, you are quite astute, Lady Flamehawk.”

Elena blushed slightly and admitted, “I learned most of my knowledge of magical creatures from Ruby Benson while we were at the Agharta Academy of Magic. Anyway, it does seem like our comrades followed me here, as they were supposed to.”

Sure enough, Lily’s detachment soon arrived. Juliana and the rest of the platoon were not far behind them. Lily and Elena’s comrades had realized that Layla was not an enemy due to the fact that she was not attacking either of the two arcanists.

Haley and Layla seemed keenly interested in each other, due to their common ancestry. Tala ran up and embraced Lily when she reached her. Elisa was dutifully keeping watch for any other potential enemy stragglers in the vicinity. Howard made sure to heal Lily’s internally injured stomach once he arrived. Chuck reported in to Elena as Juliana arrived with Stanley and Lana not far behind her with the rest of the platoon. Lily also expressed gratitude and relief at being reunited with her comrades. Haley admitted that she had feared for the worst after they had lost Lily behind a series of artillery impacts. Howard pointed out that Lily had been ultimately lucky that she had not taken a direct, or near-direct, hit from an enemy heavy artillery piece. Also, of course, Lily had been lucky to have been found by Layla after having been knocked out.

Lily and Layla explained all that had happened since Lily had woken up to the rest of Flamehawk Squadron. Elena made the “executive decision” to allow the young flame dragon to follow them back to Playamar. From what Chuck told Lily, it sounded like the battle had indeed been won. The surviving DRA forces had fallen back all the way to their transport ships and sailed away as fast as they could. The UCG militia was focusing on cleanup operations, while Major Woodstock’s forces were securing and searching the enemy camps. Flamehawk Squadron had been given permission to return to Playamar and rest for the time being.

As Flamehawk Squadron was heading back to Playamar with their new ally, Chuck asked
Layla, “You apparently said that you came here to fight for Terranor. Seeing as though you are a flame dragon, are you from the Flame Duchy?”

Layla nodded yes and admitted, “That would be correct. To be honest, I snuck out of my home country to go and help fight the DRA because I wanted to inspire the Flame Duchess Mirana to join the war on the side of the Domain. You see… She is my mother.”

Lily gasped and asked, “So, one of the most powerful Terranoran dragons is your mother? …I guess that explains why you pretended that ‘Duke’ was your last name.”

Layla nodded and explained, “I was hoping that if I joined the Terranoran forces in their fight, it would force my mother to reconsider sending out her armies to assist in driving the DRA from this continent. I actually might have some information on who one of the DRA’s upper-level commanders could be.”

Haley patted Layla on the side and smiled one of her toothy smiles. She said, “I like you already, Layla. You have honestly made me feel better about my own ancestry. Let’s hope that your mother does follow your example sometime soon.”

Elena nodded and then finished, “Once we return to Playamar, we will have to make a report and find out what our superiors want to do with Layla here. I don’t think they will say no to having a flame dragon join our side. The DRA forces in Ruvia are drawing ever closer. We will need all the help we can get soon.”

Lily was just relieved to be alive for the time being. She followed her comrades and their new draconic ally back to the port city of Playamar. There, she was hoping to get some well-deserved rest.
On the way back to Playamar, Layla told the members of Flamehawk Squadron something she thought could be of interest to the Terranoran military. Her mother, the Flame Duchess Mirana, had told her that the Southern and Central regions of Dalugon, south of a vast mountain range and an expanse of desolate badlands, were home to eight ancient dragon-ruled nations. Eight out of the ten common varieties of greater dragons had a nation of their own. These being the flame, forest, desert, swamp, foothill, noble, earth and sea dragons. The Fadalian dragons were loyal to their native land and very rare on Dalugon. As for the feral dragons, they were not intelligent enough to run a civilization of their own. Those lands ruled by dragons had historically not gotten involved with the world outside of their eight realms very often. Therefore, someone, or something, must have united at least a few of them to form the DRA.

Elena soon caught on to the idea that the rulers of the dragon lands of Dalugon were likely responsible for the DRA. However, Layla admitted that she only knew anything about one of the eight Dragon Rulers. She said that her mother despised the current Lord of the Flame Dragons. Apparently, he had only risen to his current high office less than a half-century ago. That had been when his uncle, the previous Flame Dragon Lord, was somehow assassinated. The current Lord of the Flame Dragons was named Kralthorix. Apparently, Mirana detested him both because of what she had described as his “Detestable attitudes regarding females” and because he had tried to lay political claim to the Flame Duchy. His grounds for that were mainly that he was the Lord of the Flame Dragons and therefore, all other Flame Dragon Nobles should submit to his authority. Layla wondered if Kralthorix was responsible, at least in part, for the DRA’s assault on Terranor.

Elena seemed quite interested in Layla’s intel. She said that she would report it to Major Woodstock as soon as she had the opportunity to do so. Lily was both disturbed and concerned regarding what the Flame Duchess had meant regarding Kralthorix’s “Detestable attitudes regarding females.”

Once Flamehawk Squadron reached Playamar and were allowed inside the city, Elena and Juliana said that they would take Layla and find somewhere for her to stay. Layla awkwardly admitted that she was used to sleeping on a pile of gold and other treasures. She honestly wondered why dragons such as herself often found treasure so intoxicatingly alluring.

Haley had pointed out that she had never regarded gold and similar precious materials as worth keeping for any reason other than their monetary value. Howard seemed to feel the same way. He also pointed out that his faith made him more concerned with spiritual welfare than material possessions. Of course, the two of them were only partly draconic.

Elena dismissed her soldiers, including Lana and Stanley, for the time being. Lily went right back to her quarters in the local military base to get some rest. She felt like she needed it after all that had happened on the battlefield that day.

The next day, it was sometime in the afternoon as Lily stood in the training ground of the Playamar base. She was wearing her uniform, but not carrying her knife or sidearm. The young half-light elf was still relieved that Lana Ewdrick had not confronted her about her presence in the military since the successful rescue mission. However, Lily was still wondering where Major Woodstock’s forces would be deployed to next. It was seeming more and more likely that the DRA would seize control of the entire Ruvia region and advance on Agharta through the southern portion of Central Terranor. From what reports had been coming in, the Western front had stabilized with the DRA forces there having fallen back multiple times. At least the Terranoran
Lily focused herself and stared right ahead. Directly in front of her at a distance of about forty feet was a large, reinforced, wooden practice target. Lily was on the training ground to practice a spell she had long been hoping to prefect. She stretched out her hands and soundwaves began to ripple out of them. She then made a quick series of gestures and aimed both of her palms outward. A series of visible soundwaves flew forward and shattered the target to splinters.

Lily grinned for once. She knew that this spell would not let her blast entire groups of enemies. Still, it would make her much more capable against enemy vehicles, artillery and heavy infantry.

Lily heard a familiar voice calling out, “Nice one, Lil!”

She turned to see a casually-dressed Haley walking over to her. The half-dragoness was wearing her Copper Unicorn medal pinned to her silver shirt. Haley then chuckled, “That wooden target did not stand a chance!”

Lily rolled her eyes and smiled over at Haley. She then asked her friend, “What’s happening?”

Haley replied, “I came to find you. You know that Tala and I were worried sick about you yesterday. We were honestly worried that all we would find of you would be pieces, if anything. Still, the battle was not yet over and we had to keep pursuing the enemy until they abandoned their camps. Thankfully, Captain Joland was willing to search for you. And, of course, Layla found you before the enemy could.”

Lily nodded and told Haley, “I think I heard Lt. Carlton mention this morning that Major Woodstock was interested in what Layla knew. She was apparently even considering assigning Layla to our platoon, not knowing where else to put her.”

Haley replied, “That honestly sounds fine by me, Layla joining our unit that is. I still wonder which of the Dragon Rulers are actually behind the DRA. And, if there is one, who is the mastermind behind it all. Maybe it is this Kralthorix, maybe not? To be fair, we have not faced many, if any, sea, foothill, noble or earth dragons so far. Maybe some of those varieties are fighting our allies in Ruvia for all I know?”

Lily changed the subject, asking Haley, “Was there another reason you came to find me?”

Haley told Lily, “Yeah, I was wondering if you wanted to explore the city with me and maybe have dinner? Tala is with Howard. They are visiting with their families. Elisa is with her little sister Clara. Chuck was going to speak with Lana and Stanley.”

Lily smiled and told Haley, “Sounds good to me. I will change into my casual clothes and we will be off.”

Haley smiled and nodded as Lily followed her back to their barracks. It did not take Lily long to change out of her uniform and into her light blue and black casual outfit. She also grabbed her coin purse, Haley grabbed hers as well. The two women set out into Playamar soon after Lily was changed.

The two friends spent the next few hours exploring the historic city. Unfortunately, much of Playamar had been destroyed in late 1890 and had needed to be rebuilt in the following years. The reason behind that destruction was that the city had been the sight of the final defeat of the
United Church of God’s forces by the armies of the, newly-reconstituted, Domain of Terranor. Still, there was certainly plenty to be seen in the coastal settlement. Thankfully, the combined might of Major Woodstock’s forces and the UCG militia had driven the DRA away before they had gotten the chance to enter the city proper and do any real damage.

As evening fell and the sky darkened, Lily and Haley were not far from the docks. The two friends had been enjoying their time in Playamar. It seemed like Haley’s prominently displayed medal had helped her avoid unpleasant looks from civilians and soldiers alike. As Lily and Haley were heading towards the center of the port city, hoping to find a decent place to eat, they came across something that gave the two of them pause.

Looking down an alleyway, Lily and Haley noticed a pair of male dwarven dock workers and one older-looking light elf man. The light elf man had light skin, a short beard, greying hair and dirty-looking old clothes. The pair of dwarves were glaring at the light elf, who they had likely cornered.

One of the two dwarves told the light elf, “You came to the wrong city, old man. We don’t much like your kind around here. You people cannot be trusted, you wiped out thousands of innocents. Given the opportunity, you could do it again.”

As the second dwarf worker nodded in agreement, the light elf stumbled a bit and waved an empty bottle of some kind of liquor at the dwarves. It was obvious to Lily that he was quite drunk. The bearded elf then responded, “I would apologize… but not to thugs like you two! …” He then hiccupped loudly.

The second dwarf pressed one fist into an empty hand and told his associate, “This fine city does not need an old drunk like this guy hanging around. Normally, I would pity someone in his circumstances, but never a light elf!”

The second dwarf agreed and the pair advanced on the old man. Haley balled up her fists and stepped forward. Lily knew what Haley was going to try and do. She quickly told her friend, “Last time you did something like this, you ended up in jail.”

Haley snarled a bit. However, she told Lily, “This time, I have you as a witness. Also, I have a commanding officer who I think will understand the circumstances.”

As Haley walked towards the alley, Lily groaned and followed her close behind. She did not want to look like a coward in front of Haley. Besides, the pair had killed plenty of enemy soldiers together. How much could two unarmed civilians do to them?

As the dwarves were closing in on the bottle-waving man, Haley called out to them, “I have to ask, exactly what do you two personally get out of beating up an old person?”

The pair of dwarves whirled around to see Haley with her hands on her hips, starting them down with her orange eyes. One of the dwarves stammered, “A half-dragon? …What’s that on her shirt?”

Lily stepped into the dwarves view and said, “A medal given for exemplary military service.”

The other dwarf snarled, “That blonde girl has light-elven ancestry! I can see it in her face.”

Haley cracked her knuckles and told the pair of dwarves, “This is your last chance. Leave the old man alone and get out of here. Or else, I will knock both of your lights out and drag you
two to the authorities.”

The elderly light elf added, “This girl looks tough….” He then burped loudly.

Lily rolled her eyes at the old man. She then conjured up a force shield, just in case one of the dwarves got past Haley.

One dwarf told the other, “She’s an arcanist! Look, we don’t have weapons. We can’t take these two. Either one of them could probably roast us alive.”

The second dwarf sighed and admitted, “If they are soldiers, they will know how to fight better than either of us. …Should we scram?”

The first dwarf nodded and mockingly told Lily and Haley, “We will take our leave of you now, ladies.” He then ran into a nearby side alley with his friend right behind him. Neither of them wanted to try running past the two women blocking their path to the main street.

The drunken old elf stumbled forward as Haley walked up to him with Lily in tow. He stammered at Haley, “You are such a nice girl… you look like a monster… but you are so caring and willing to help others.”

Haley did not seem to react to the “monster” comment as Lily looked and felt disgusted with the beneficiary of their assistance. Haley took the old man’s free hand and told him, “Why don’t we take you someplace where you can rest? I don’t know if you will be safe out here on the streets.”

The old man nodded and then did a quasi-bow for Haley and Lily. He told them, “A tavern sounds quite nice for such a purpose. Also… my name is Sileniel Tardor. I am…at your…service.”

Haley looked over to Lily and told her, “We will still have time for a late dinner after this. Don’t worry. I just want to make sure this old guy gets somewhere he can sleep the night and not get the crap beat out of him.”

Lily just nodded and sighed, knowing that she was not going to be able stop Haley from doing what she saw as a good deed.

Sileniel looked over at Lily as he was still following Haley. He remarked, “Your friend is so beautiful. She almost reminds me of a woman I once knew….” Sileniel suddenly began to shed a few tears. He then did his best to regain some of his composure.

Haley took a deep breath as Lily was blushing a bit. She then told Sileniel, “I think I noticed a tavern just down the street earlier. We will take you there. However, please don’t drink any more alcohol for the time being.”

Sileniel nodded and saluted Haley. He told her, sounding weirdly official now, “Yes ma’am! I really need to lay off of this stuff…” He then let out another sudden hiccup.

Lily folded her arms and followed Haley and Sileniel to the tavern where the three of them sat down at a booth. Haley insisted that Sileniel just be given water by the staff. He complied, but still burped and hiccupped occasionally.

Lily was left alone with the old man when Haley went off to see if she could pay to have him stay one night in a room on the upper floor. She was hoping that they would leave Sileniel at the tavern and go off to have their own dinner soon.
Suddenly, Sileniel told Lily, “Young lady, your friend is really an amazing person. … What’s her name? … I want to be able to address her correctly…”

Lily just replied, “Her name is Haley, just Haley. And yes, she is pretty amazing, come to think of it…”

As Lily was thinking more about Haley and how somebody could even be as kind as she was, Sileniel leaned in and whispered to her, still clearly quite inebriated, “Girl, just between you and me… since light elf blood runs through your veins, when I was your age they would have executed someone like her on the spot. Same with the deep elves, the orcs, etcetera. … I remember my old army days… Still, what fools we were. We had no right to do the things we did. Those damn dwarves were not entirely wrong…. I’m still so glad I never got deployed to the front lines…” He then burped quietly and lowered his head to stare at the table.

Lily quietly gasped. She knew what Sileniel had to have been talking about. It took a long time for pure elves to grow visibly old. The man across the table from her had served in the Continental Army of the Order of Light. She knew her history well enough to know that he had to be over a century and a half old. Possibly over a century and three-quarters old. Lily looked around and saw Haley making her way back to the table with a room key. Lily got up, as Sileniel was still table-gazing. She then walked over to Haley grabbed the half-dragon girl’s arm. She then whispered, “Haley… I honestly think Sileniel over there was with the Order of Light. He told me about how people like you were executed on the spot when he was my age. He also mentioned his army days. Still, he expressed some remorse over the whole thing…”

Haley quietly interjected, “That explains the ‘monster’ comment. Still, he is just a harmless old man now. I see no point in turning him in and I don’t necessarily regret saving him from those two dwarves. You said that he expressed remorse anyway.”

Lily sighed a bit as Haley made her way back over to the table where Sileniel sat. The old man looked up at the half-dragon and said, “Haley, you are back. Is that room key for little old me?”

Haley replied, “Yes. You should consider yourself quite lucky that we showed up when we did. Please be careful around both dwarves and alcohol next time.”

Sileniel nodded and then got up from his booth. He looked over at Lily and asked her, “You told me Haley’s name, but I never got yours. What is your name, young lady?”

Lily folded her arms and replied, “Lily, just Lily.”

Sileniel’s eyes opened wide and tears reappeared in his eyes. He exclaimed, “Lily!” He then burped and promptly passed out. He crumpled back into his seat without sustaining injury.

Lily and Haley each gave each other an awkward look. Haley then walked over and hoisted the unconscious Sileniel over her shoulder and began to carry him towards the staircase heading to the second floor. Haley told Lily, “You can wait here. I’ve got this. We will head somewhere decent for dinner as soon as I am back.”

Lily just nodded as Haley carried Sileniel up the stairs.

When Haley returned, Lily told her, as they left the tavern, “You are quite the young woman, Haley. You know that?”

Haley shrugged her shoulders and told Lily, “I am just trying to leave this world a better
place than when I got here. Sometimes, that means fighting and even killing. Sometimes, that
means helping those who need it most. You know, you of all people should understand what it's
like to be alone considering your circumstances. I was a bit surprised that you were not nicer to
Sileniel.”

Lily sighed and told Haley, “You really did not belong in prison…”

Haley pointed out, “You were a victim of circumstances, Lil. Just remember to not let your
past define you. You have the potential to be a better person. Hopefully, I will be around to see you
fulfill it.”

Lily blushed a bit as the two Privates headed off to find a good restaurant to eat dinner at.

After eating dinner at a well-decorated seafood restaurant not far from the docks, Lily and
Haley returned to the base where they were staying. Lily got ready to fall asleep in her small bed.
She closed her eyes… then, they shot open.

A long-gestating realization had hit Lily “head on” like a truck going at full speed. Haley
was indeed ‘quite the young woman.’ In fact, there was nobody Lily had ever met who had made
her feel the same way that Haley did. Even though she had made more friends since her enlistment,
Haley was still someone special to her. It finally, truly, dawned on Lily that she was in love with
her first friend. She was in love with Haley.
A Confession on the Beach

Lily had not gotten nearly as much sleep that night as she had wanted to. She had not tossed and turned, she had just stared upwards while thinking about Haley. Following her realization that she was in love with her first friend, Lily had tried to talk herself out of what she was feeling. She tried to convince herself repeatedly that she was just falling for Haley because the half-dragon girl had been the first person to consistently show her kindness. However, she still could not shake the feeling that there was something more to her affection for the red-scaled former mercenary.

Ultimately, Lily was forced to conclude that she was, in fact, in love with Haley and there was no way around it. The most bizarre part of it was that Lily was sure that she loved Haley because Haley was so many things Lily was not. Haley was brave, compassionate, kind and self-sacrificing. Lily had learned some measure of courage recently, like when she had stood in front of Layla before discovering her true flame dragon nature. She had also learned to care fiercely for her close comrades and friends. However, she knew that was not a truly good person like Haley was. In fact, Lily was pretty sure that she would never be as selfless and heroic as her first friend.

Before finally falling asleep, Lily had come to a simple decision. She would have to tell Haley the way she felt as soon as the opportunity presented itself. It would simply make things too awkward for her to continue to spend time with the object of her affections without being honest about her feelings. Lily had no idea if Haley reciprocated her feeling of love. However, she liked to think that there was some possibility that Haley would at least be willing to give a “relationship upgrade” a chance. From what Lily knew, Haley certainly found her attractive. She had said as much when they first met. There had also been Haley’s reaction to seeing Lily in a dress back in Ouktai. She had obviously been impressed then. All that Lily could do was tell Haley how she felt and go from there. Even if Haley rejected her, it was not like Lily wasn’t used to getting disappointment out of life.

The next morning, Lily was eating breakfast in the mess hall by herself. She was wearing her regular uniform without any of her weapons. As Lily was nearly done eating, she heard a familiar voice saying, “Well there you are, Lily.”

Lily turned and looked to see a casually-dressed Tala Guissel walking over towards her. Lily asked Tala, “Is there something wrong?”

Tala giggled and rolled her eyes. She then replied, “No, not at all. No need to be so cynical.”

Lily sighed a bit and then asked her deep-elven friend, “Sorry, Tala. I guess it’s just my upbringing. So, what is it really?”

Tala nodded affirmatively and told Lily, “Lt. Benson just informed me that the local government has reserved a section of beach for Major Woodstock’s command for today only. Almost everyone in our platoon is going to head down there for the day.”

Lily stood up and quickly asked Tala, “Do you know if Haley will be there?” She was thinking, “I have heard people say that beaches are romantic. This could be just the time to tell Haley how I feel about her!”

Tala nodded affirmatively and told Lily, “When I told her, she told me that she was off to find a swimsuit. …She mentioned wanting to get one that suited her. I actually find it strange that a
half-flame dragon would want to go to the beach. Layla said she would stay well away from the water when I told her. Anyway, Howard went to his mother’s house to get his swimsuit and I intend to do the same. Elisa said that she and Clara would be willing to go shopping with you to find the right suit. There are plenty of stores that sell swimsuits around here. It’s a coastal city after all."

Lily playfully saluted Tala and told her, “I will be there. Let me just change into my casual clothes and get my money.”

Tala nodded and smiled. She then told Lily, “I will ask Elisa to meet with you with Clara at the barracks where you are staying.”

Lily nodded and then went to put her food tray back as Tala left to go home and pick up her swimsuit. Lily changed into her casual clothes upon returning to her barracks and grabbed her money. She was soon met by Elisa and her little sister, the arcanist healer Clara Verite. Elisa was wearing a dark blue shirt and a black skirt. She had sandals on for once, probably in anticipation of the beach day. Clara had long silver hair and light grey skin like her older sister. She was wearing a dark red shirt and long black pants with short red boots.

As the three women left the base and headed closer to the beach, Lily got to know Clara a little better. She, unlike her older sister, had joined the army to ease suffering, rather than see new places. Clara, also unlike Elisa, was averse to combat. She preferred being on the backlines where she could avoid fighting. Lily could still tell from the quiet conviction in Clara’s voice that she would be willing to dash out onto an active battlefield if it meant saving allied lives.

Elisa also talked about having kept boys away from Clara when the two of them were in school. It seemed that Clara had had many admirers. Of course, it now seemed, as Clara and Lily were happy to mention, that Elisa had an admirer herself now. The mercenary sniper Cyril Forrester had obviously taken quite an interest in Elisa and was not being shy about it. Elisa just blushed and folded her arms when Cyril was mentioned.

The three girls soon found themselves at a small store within sight of the beach. The store mainly sold swimwear and other beach supplies. There was likely an abundance of tourists in the city visiting the beaches and historic military sights when there were no wars going on. Therefore, the store likely did a good business during peacetime. For the time being, the proprietors were happy to have customers, be they soldiers or civilians.

Lily looked over a few options by herself while Elisa and Clara shopped together. She picked out a couple of options and then went to the private changing area in the back of the store to try them on.

In the end, Lily could not resist light blue. It had always been her color. She ended up buying a cute light blue swimsuit with slight yellow trim. Lily wanted to look her absolute best when she hopefully met up with Haley on the beach. She wanted to impress her beloved.

Lily put her casual clothes back on after making her selection and left the store with Elisa and Clara. The two half-deep elves told her that they had made their own purchases at the seaside shop. Lily then followed Elisa and Clara to the beach. There, they discovered that quite a long strip of the city’s beach north of the harbor had been marked as reserved for the five Special Actions Platoons.

Lily and the two Verite sisters soon found a series of beachside changing booths. There, they changed into their swimsuits and put their casual clothes into beach bags that they had purchased at the seaside shop.
When Lily emerged, wearing her light blue swimsuit and looking out onto the beach, she saw Chuck closer to the water talking with Howard. They were both wearing light blue and orange men’s swim trunks.

It was not long until Elisa and Clara emerged from their changing booths. Elisa was wearing a dark blue swimsuit and Clara was wearing a dark red one. As the three women looked around, Lily noticed Ruby and Emmet Benson relaxing on beach chairs not that far away. She saw Tanya Woodstock and Hitomi Winslow chatting under an umbrella a bit down the beach. Emily Falchum then ran past her and the two half-deep elves in a black swimsuit. Alicia Forrester came right behind her wearing a light blue swimsuit colored similarly to Lily’s. It seemed like the two girls were playing. Lily remembered seeing them briefly kiss back in Ouktai.

After Emily and Alicia passed, Lily looked directly ahead of her and saw a smiling Tala walking towards her, Elisa and Clara. She was wearing a cute black swimsuit with a similar design to Elisa and Clara’s. Cyril Forrester was not far behind her in black swim trunks.

Tala said, “I was wondering when you three would make it down here. At least you three all look great. Howard said the same thing to me when we came down here. I had to remind him that he has seen me in this outfit about a hundred times.”

Lily wondered, as she had wondered so many times before, how Tala managed to be as peppy as she often was. She then asked her friend, “Have you seen Haley around here yet?”

Tala nodded and replied, “Yeah, I saw her headed off that way.” She then pointed to the right and Lily smiled.

Cyril then walked up to the four women and said, “Hey, Elisa.”

Elisa blushed slightly. However, she soon smiled back at Cyril and replied, “Hey yourself.”

As Tala went to go and talk with Howard and Chuck, Clara decided to follow her, mentioning wanting to meet the grandson of Sapphire Coril for herself.

As Elisa and Cyril began to chat, Lily excused herself and headed off to find Haley. She left the bag with her casual clothes at the designated place nearby the changing booths. She headed down the beach past various soldiers who were enjoying themselves while they could. Eventually, Lily found the person she had been looking for.

Haley was standing alone and looking out onto the water. Her arms were folded and she was wearing a vaguely sparkly silver swimsuit. Lily chuckled a bit, realizing that Haley’s interesting taste in fashion extended even to swimwear. Still, to Lily, at that moment, Haley was the most beautiful girl in the world scales, teeth, claws, tail and all.

Lily nervously put her hands behind her back and shifted her weight. She knew that this was going to end up being a big moment for her one way or another. She happened to notice that Layla was sunning herself in her natural draconic form on a large rock in the distance. It turned out that someone must have convinced the young dragon to come down to the beach, even if she was not in the water.

As Lily was about to say something, Haley turned her head towards Lily and seemed to smile. As Lily blushed slightly, Haley told her, “You know, this beach reminds me of Scralville. I really do miss that place. I had a swimsuit kind of like this back home. Believe it or not, I spent a lot of time on the beach back then. …Those were good times. I will get back there some day… I just know it. Even if I have to go there alone, I will make sure that my hometown is free again.”
After Haley finished her statement, Lily, without even thinking, blurted out, “You don’t have to go there alone! …I mean that I’ll go with you, even if nobody else will….”

Haley asked Lily, “If memory serves, you wanted to get into the Agharta Academy of Magic when the war is won. Have you changed your mind all of the sudden?”

Lily replied, “Yes, I still want to attend the magic academy. It’s just that I want to help you, even if it means risking my life more than necessary. You were my first friend, the first person who was ever kind to me, the first person who ever gave a damn about me.”

Haley seemed to raise an “eyebrow.” She asked Lily, “Are you ok? You are not normally like this. Not that I’m not appreciative regarding your offer of support.”

Lily blushed brightly as Haley continued to over at her, clearly a bit concerned. She then took a deep breath and looked Haley in the eyes as best as she could. Deciding that it was now or never, despite how nervous she was, Lily told Haley, “Haley, I would not want you go into danger alone. The reason is that… Well, I have thought about this quite a bit and… The truth, is… Haley, I have come to realize that… I love you.”

Haley only seemed to stagger back just a smidge. She just stood there silently for some time. The half-dragon woman then heaved a seriously deep sigh. She looked directly at Lily and asked her, “Are you just saying this because I was your first friend? Have you actually thought what you are saying through?”

Lily nodded repeatedly and replied, “I thought it over and over again. I cannot see away around the fact that I love you. Nobody makes me feel the way that you do, Hales.”

Haley heaved another seriously deep sigh and then said, “Lily, you are a good friend and a surprisingly good soldier. You have certainly improved in many ways since we first met. However, you are not a good person, even though you are not an evil person to be sure. Most of your past wrongdoing was arguably due to you being a victim of truly bad circumstances. Still, I don’t want to enter a romantic relationship with someone who is as far from my moral equal as you are. I am truly sorry. On looks alone, I would absolutely date you. You are stunningly beautiful and you look amazing in that swimsuit. However, I simply don’t want to be someone’s lover based on their appearance alone.”

Tears had been streaking down Lily’s face ever since Haley had said that she was not a good person. She had expected the possibility that Haley would not reciprocate her feeling of love. However, her first romantic rejection hurt and it hurt like nothing ever had before for her. Lily stammered, “Haley… I am sorry… But, I can’t just turn off the way I feel about you. As hurtful as they are, your words can’t stop me from being in love with you.”

Haley shook her head, clearly somewhat upset. She looked back up at Lily and told her, “I am sorry as well. I still want to be your friend and I will still have your back. However, I don’t reciprocate your feelings, even though I am flattered that you are interested in me. I do hope that you find a woman who is a better fit for you than I am. I still want you to be happy and be loved.”

Lily was doing her best to control the stream of tears coming down her face. She simply told Haley, “I guess that I’m sorry I came over here. However, I will not give up on you, not yet. I should go now. …I will see you when I see you.”

With that Lily just walked away her hands in fists. However, she was angrier with herself than with Haley. Lily knew that should have realized that Haley would not view her as worthy of her love at this stage. Now, she just needed some way to convince her beloved otherwise. Even if it
took months, Lily knew that she was unlikely to ever love anyone else the way she loved Haley.

Lily found a trio of empty beach chairs and sat down on the one farthest from where Haley was. She curled up into a bit of a ball and sat there. She honestly wondered why the world had given her such rotten luck. Sure, she had survived many street fights and lethal battles. She was also widely considered to be incredibly beautiful and was born with a powerful talent. However, real happiness and inner peace still eluded her, despite having made friends and put her criminal past behind her.

After sitting for about an hour, Lily heard a familiar woman’s voice asking, “Is there something wrong, Lily? You don’t look so good.”

Lily look up and saw Juliana Carlton in a light blue and black swimsuit standing nearby her. She told the Priestess Lieutenant, “Yeah, there is something wrong. The one person I truly love in this world just rejected me.”

Juliana sat down in the beach chair next to Lily. She asked the sorceress, “Would you like to talk about it?”

Lily sighed and nodded her head yes. She remembered that as a priestess, Juliana was the sort of person people might unload their problems on. She was most likely used to being a quasi-therapist for whoever needed counseling.

With Juliana sitting next to her, Lily decided to explain her situation, in full, to the young officer. Hopefully, Juliana would have something helpful to say. She seemed like the type to be able to offer such advice.

Lily told Juliana essentially everything from her time at the orphanage to running with her, now disbanded, street gang. She talked about being imprisoned after having been arrested by Juliana’s adoptive older sister of all people.

Juliana admitted that Lana had told her about Lily after her recent rescue. However, Juliana had assured her big sister that Lily had made no desertion attempts, or done anything against regulations, since her enlistment.

Lily then went on to talk about meeting Haley and being shown kindness for once. She then talked about Captain Benson’s offer of enlistment and her joining the military. Then, she talked about her friendship with Haley. She included the incident with the drunk old man the last night. However, she did not mention the light elf’s involvement with the Order of Light. Finally, Lily talked about her having recently come to realize that she was in love with Haley and the rejection that she had just experienced.

Juliana patiently listened to Lily the whole time. the blonde Lieutenant sighed a bit and then told Lily, “I am truly sorry about your upbringing. As you know, I had my own share of problems regarding my childhood. I was raised in a malevolent and false faith. My birth parents demanded my execution once they learned that I was gay. It was only thanks to Elena and her father that I was able to escape death and move to Terranor. There, I found companionship and inner peace among the believers of the United Church. Say what you want about my religion, it gave me something to believe in and even a new family.”

As Lily nodded, Juliana continued, “Regarding Haley and your love for her. You have two options as far as I am concerned. For one, you could keep trying to prove yourself worthy of her love. I would advise not being too aggressive if you take that path. Who knows, maybe she will come around to returning your feelings in time? Alternatively, you could decide to look for
intimate companionship elsewhere? Maybe you and Haley were only meant to be friends?”

Lily nodded, her eyes dry by now. She then told Juliana, “I can’t give up on Haley. I am convinced that she is the love of my life. Still, I think that you are lucky to have married the woman you love already.”

Juliana sighed and chuckled a bit. She then told Lily, “Even after moving to Terranor, Elena and I both internally denied our feelings for each other. We both wanted it not to be so. We kept telling ourselves that we had too little in common. We kept saying that our awkward, often combative, friendship, could never blossom into real love. Of course, we were both wrong. In time, we were able to overlook the things in each other we disapproved of and find the good in each other. In the end, it was Elena who made the first move one fateful day that changed our lives in more ways than one. That was also the day where she truly became the Flamehawk of Austean. My point is that love can be quite complicated sometimes. You would do well to remember that.”

Lily nodded and then noticed someone approaching them. Juliana looked up and smiled warmly as she saw her raven-haired wife, Elena, walking over to them. Elena, who was wearing a dark blue and black swimsuit, smiled at Juliana and said, “Well there you are, gorgeous.”

As Elena sat down on the third beach chair, Juliana blushed a bit and replied, “I was just trying to help Lily here. She has been though something rough today.”

Lily just nodded and then stood up. She told Elena and Juliana, “I should go and leave you two to each other. Thank you for your time, Lieutenant.” She then instinctively saluted the two officers and headed off to find Tala.

Lily did manage to find Tala with Howard not that far away. She spent some time discussing some magical theories with the pair. Later, she managed to chat with Ruby about the Agharta Academy of Magic and the classes she had taken there. Lily even had the opportunity later that day to learn some things about Fadalian shamanism from Hitomi. It seemed like Clara was with Chuck and Cyril was keeping Elisa occupied. Emily was still with Alicia and Tanya was with Emmet.

That evening, Lily left the beach after having an early dinner alone. She returned to her barracks without having told anyone else about her rejection by Haley. She also did not see the half-dragon girl again that day. When Lily was about to fall asleep that night, she told herself that she would not give up on being with Haley. She would just have to be patient. She would wait as long as it took. She still knew that Haley just had to be the only one for her.
The morning after having been romantically rejected by Haley on the Playamar beach, Lily was having breakfast alone in the mess hall once again. She was still reeling somewhat from what she had been told yesterday. Haley had by no means suggested that Lily was unworthy of love in general. However, she had made it quite clear that she believed Lily was unworthy of her love. Having been told that she was not a good person had stuck with Lily. Lily knew that Haley was right. She just did not know what exactly to do about making herself appear to be a good person in her beloved’s eyes.

When Lily happened to look up, she saw Tala walking over to her. This time she was in uniform. Tala sat down across the table from Lily with her tray of food. The deep elf girl asked, “Lily, when we chatted a bit yesterday, you seemed kind of out of it. I know that you had gone off to find Haley beforehand. …What happened to you?”

Lily sighed, both grateful that Tala was concerned about her and annoyed that her friend had sensed that something was wrong and was now bringing it up. Lily put her head in her hands and told Tala, “I might as well come out with it. I recently came to realize that I am in love with Haley. However, when I confessed my feelings yesterday, Haley told me that I was not a good person and therefore, she did not want to be with me. Does that answer your question?”

Tala just nodded as she took a bite of food. She then seemed to realize something and blushed quite brightly. Tala asked, “So, you weren’t ‘with anyone’ last night? I can only guess that Haley was not either.”

Lily raised an eyebrow at Tala and asked her, “Of course I was not ‘with anyone.’ Why is that unusual?”

Tala blushed again and confessed, “You see… I was ‘with someone’ last night, for the first time in my life. The funny thing was that Elisa admitted to me that Cyril Forrester seduced her last night. She is kind of upset that Clara apparently spent the night with our Sergeant. However, she admitted that there was no man she would trust more with her sister.”

Lily blushed this time, she then cautiously asked Tala, “Who were you with? Was it…”

Tala simply smiled and replied, “It was Howard, who else would it have been. Yesterday evening we had a long talk. He told me that he loved me. He said that he had felt that way since we were little. We both knew that with the way things are going in Ruvia, this war is far from over. We decided to spend a night together so that we would know what making love was like come what may.”

Lily sighed a bit and smiled over at Tala. She told her friend, “I am honestly happy for you. At least one of us is loved by someone. …As for Haley, I am not giving up on her. I still believe that she is the love of my life. I will keep fighting for her, for myself and for our squad.”

Tala looked pleased and told Lily, “I guess you will have your work cut out for you if you want to court Haley. Honestly, at least Howard’s sharp teeth are a bit more concealed than Haley’s. It makes kissing him much easier than you would think. Still, Haley is a great person and I think she deserves someone who loves her unconditionally.”

Lily gave Tala a warm smile and the two women got to eating their breakfasts. Lily was honestly grateful to have met Tala. She was a true friend and a generally positive presence in Lily’s
life. It was actually quite ironic that cold magic was her primary specialty. She was what most would call a “warm” person for certain.

One week after the beach day, Lily was standing in a large auditorium along with dozens of other uniformed soldiers. All five Special Actions Platoons assigned to Major Tanya Woodstock’s command were present. A significant number of the United Church’s militia soldiers were also present wearing their light blue and orange uniforms. The two groups mainly stayed together, creating a clear demarcation.

Over the last week, Lily had had far less contact with Haley than usual. Normally, the two women were frequently together. However, ever since Lily’s failed attempt to initiate a romantic relationship with Haley, they had not interacted much. Lily noticed Haley standing a little bit in front of her in the crowd. Chuck and Elisa were standing next to Haley.

It was not long until the soldiers in the auditorium were all called to attention by Captain Emmet Benson. Major Tanya Woodstock walked up to a raised podium at the front of the room and cleared her throat. Lily knew that whatever the Major had to say, it was almost certainly going to be very important. There was very little chance that it was not news of their next deployment.

Tanya looked over the crowd before her and then began, “Listen up, everyone. My mother, General Sandra Woodstock, has issued our new deployment orders. With very few exceptions, every Terranoran soldier stationed here in Playamar is going to be deployed southwest to the Great Plains of Salmanca. This region, just north of Ruvia and south of Agharta, is where construction is currently making progress on a grand defensive line to protect Agharta from the DRA. Unfortunately, our enemies have seized nearly all of the Ruvian Peninsula. Our forces have also just abandoned Sandgate Fortress, the stronghold that has historically protected Agharta from the south. The DRA promptly moved in within days of our army vacating Sandgate.”

Tanya took a moment to clear her throat and then continued, “The series of defenses that we will be deployed to has been dubbed the ‘Woodstock Line’ by the press. We will be assisting in the defense of the line from the inevitable DRA onslaught that will come north towards our capital city. While our soldiers to the west have been steadily pushing the enemy back, the DRA’s leadership has gathered most of their forces in the vicinity of Sandgate. The battle for the Woodstock Line on the plains of Salmanca will likely decide the outcome of this war. We will all need to give everything we have towards ensuring the defense of our capital city. Requests for urgent aid have been sent to all of our Domain’s allies, both on this continent and overseas. However, for now we must rely on our existing forces to hold the line and defend our capital from the enemy.”

Lily noticed that Chuck’s hands had balled up into fists when the term “Woodstock Line” had first been mentioned. He seemed just a tad more relaxed now.

Tanya finished, “Both Terranoran Army and United Church Militia units stationed here will be transferred to the Woodstock Line. We will be departing by train tomorrow morning, heading to Agharta. From there, we will travel south and meet with our allies gathering on the Salmanca plains. I expect that most of our air corps and main army will be present for the clash to come. However, the enemy will also be bringing their full might down in an attempt to continue their advance north. For now, any questions should be directed to your unit Captains. You are all dismissed.”

After salutes were exchanged, Tanya left the auditorium and the various squad leaders made sure to get their subordinates ready to pack up and ship out the next morning. Tala expressed some annoyance at having to leave her hometown and family again. However, Howard reminded
her of the necessity of protecting Agharta from the DRA’s hordes. Captain Joland and Lieutenant Carlton focused on directing their subordinates and making sure that they would be ready to leave Playamar the next day.

The next morning, military trucks transported the soldiers stationed in Playamar to the local train station. There, a series of four trains were used to transport the soldiers and their associated war material to Agharta. After reaching Trevelyan Station, the trains were refueled and rerouted south to the small city of Razla, located on a large river not far south of Agharta.

Not that far south of Razla was the miles-long series of hastily-constructed trenches, fortifications and command posts that made up the Woodstock Line. A large hill at the rough center of the defensive line was topped with the central command post. That was where General Woodstock commanded operations from. Much of the line was still under hurried construction. Artillery batteries, camps and airfields covered great expanses behind the Woodstock Line. The Terranoran Army Engineering Corps had worked as fast as they could and enlisted all of the help they could get to start setting up the massive installation. They were working as fast as they could in the hopes that the Woodstock Line would be in the best shape possible before the DRA arrived in force to assault it. Apparently, the Terranoran Navy was still keeping the enemy’s naval forces at bay. However, they certainly could use more ships as enemy warships from Dalugon continued to sail north across the Kalatian Ocean and join the battle along the southern coastlines of Terranor.

The day that Flamehawk Squadron and their allies previously stationed in Playamar arrived at the Woodstock Line, Lily was looking over the tent that she had set up for herself nearby the tents of the other members of her platoon. In the distance, Lily could see a large number of landed Terranoran Air Corps airships that were on standby to deploy once the DRA was sighted advancing north. Lily knew that it would take the enemy main force time to advance this far north from the vicinity of Sandgate Fortress. However, once they did, the outcome of the upcoming climactic battle was still in question.

As Lily was about to declare her tent pitched and go to find Chuck for further orders, she heard an all too familiar voice asking her, “Hey, Lily… do you have a moment to talk?”

Lily turned around and saw Haley walking towards her, wearing her full uniform. Lily could not help but be nervous. She had not talked to Haley much since the incident on the beach. She wondered what the half-dragoness wanted from her now. Lily decided to simply reply, “Yes, I do.”

Haley told Lily, “Thank you. I know that we have not had much contact with each other since our beach day. However, I just wanted to let you know that I still consider the two of us friends. When the battle for Salmanca begins, I will do my best to have your back like before. I will expect the same from you, of course.”

Lily gave Haley a quick nod. She told her first friend, “Of course, I will still have your back. It’s not like I want to allow the woman I love to come to harm if I can help it.”

Haley shook her head for a moment and groaned a bit. She replied, “I see that you have not given up your ‘pursuit’ of me, have you?”

Lily shook her head and said, “It’s not like I want to look like a stalker, but I can’t help the way I feel about you. Just know that you mean the world to me, even if you don’t reciprocate my feelings. I still think that you are an amazing person, Haley. I just hope that I can earn your love one day.”

Haley sighed and admitted, “I guess that you may have finally found something to believe in. That is, even if that something is just a person, me in this case. For now, I still consider you a good
friend. I would hope that you see reason and look for another prospective lover someday soon. Still, clearly I won’t convince you to cease your pursuit so easily.”

Lily just gave Haley a nod and mentioned, “On a separate topic, did you hear about Howard and Tala getting together?”

Haley nodded and admitted, “That did not really surprise me, considering what Tala had told me earlier. I mean, Howard is not the most energetic or outgoing man. Still, he is literally golden and he is a committed and focused soldier wise beyond his years. I can see Tala finding him attractive. As for Tala, she is a true beauty and quite bubbly at times. Maybe there is a bit of ‘opposites attract’ going on there?”

Lily smiled and asked, “Did you hear about Elisa and Cyril as well?”

Haley replied, “Yes, what surprised me more was Chuck having slept with Clara. I hope that Elisa is able to keep a level head about that. She is normally so focused. I would hate to see her distracted for multiple reasons. As for Chuck himself, last time I checked, he went to go find his older sister, Selina. Her Aero Squadron has been transferred here to help hold the Woodstock Line. I have heard reports that the DRA has well over a dozen heavy military airships gathering above Sandgate as we speak. They will certainly outnumber our own zeppelins. Hopefully, our fighters and bombers will be able to turn the tide in the sky.”

Lily, who was not all that keenly aware of how high-altitude combat worked, just nodded. She told Haley, “I will stand and fight for you and our unit here on these plains. I guess that Agharta is my own hometown. I will need to do my best to defend her as well. If Agharta falls, then most of the continent will likely go with her.”

Haley nodded solemnly and then told Lily, “I have pitched my tent. Howard was designated to give us further orders by Chuck, so we better go and find him.”

Lily nodded and then followed Haley off to go and find Corporal Howard Torrance. Lily quietly vowed to herself that she would do all that she could to not let the DRA break through the Woodstock Line. If they did, they would likely win the war in Terranor. Agharta would be seized, the Academy of Magic would likely be no more, or controlled by the enemy, and if Lily survived she would have no future. She and her fellows would have to prevent the enemy from passing north through Salmanca, or die trying.
Preparing for the Clash

The Northern Outer Courtyard of Sandgate Fortress. Just north of the Ruvian Peninsula.

“Is everything alright, Lieutenant?”

Reira Strongwind snapped back into reality after hearing the voice of Corporal Andrea Syval speaking directly to her. The young half-flame dragon soldier was standing right next to her. The two women were standing in a wide-open space with sandy, reddish brown dirt covering the ground. They could see the inside of the massive and imposing outer wall and its impressive main gate not far from them.

Reira shook her wedge-shaped head a bit and told Andrea, “If you must know, I was thinking more about that archaeologist, Loktar Suleiman…”

Probably trying to be helpful, Andrea informed Reira, “I remember him quite well. I heard that he will be in the area soon. He may very well be staying in this very fortress.”

Reira simply nodded her head. She remembered well how her drink with the desert-dragon descended archaeologist had actually gone quite nicely. He was quite the gentleman. She hated to admit it, but she would happy to have the chance to see him again. She had wondered what he and his team had been up to since she had first met him farther south in the mountains of Ruvia.

Andrea then continued, “I still feel so honored that Lord Ralshenkus acknowledged me back when we met Mr. Suleiman.”

Reira pointed out, “He may the Supreme Commander of the DRA. However, he is not our Lord. My Father is.”

Andrea folded her arms and told Reira, “Not to disrespect you, or Lord Kralthorix, but we all know that Lord Ralshenkus is the one who is best positioned to sit upon the throne of Austean when this war is won.”

Reira knew well that Andrea was right. She also knew that her father would never be accepted by the other Dragon Rulers in the role that Ralshenkus sought for himself. Corporal Syval was arguably being quite smart in acknowledging who was really in control. The other Dragon Lord most heavily involved in the DRA and Operation Grand Destiny, Lotharax of the desert dragons, was himself unflinchingly loyal to Ralshenkus. However, Reira’s own father, Lord Kralthorix of the flame dragons, had been willing to travel to Terranor with Ralshenkus. Lotharax was busy at home, making sure that their supply lines and sea routes from Dalugon functioned efficiently.

Reira told Andrea, “Your point is valid. Still, I know who I serve. Just know that one well-timed comment is not going to get you into the court of one as powerful as Lord Ralshenkus.”

Andrea looked slightly taken aback. However, she simply nodded and said, “Yes ma’am.”

Reira looked up and around as two massive red and grey airships started their descent to be moored near Sandgate. The Terranorans had abandoned the old fortress, which dated back centuries in some form, soon after their retreat from northern Ruvia. Still, the DRA’s attempts to take Agharta quickly had all failed so far. The break in the Western lines and the attack on
Playamar Port had both resulted in routes. As it turned out, Reira had been able to gather some intelligence recently that likely explained their allies’ recent defeats. She was planning to present that intelligence very shortly.

As a small flight of three-engine Firestorm-class bombers flew overhead, escorted by a squadron of Manticore fighters, Reira saw her father descending from the sky towards herself and Andrea. He was followed closely by Ralshenkus. The two enormous crowned dragons landed one after the other not far from Reira and Andrea. The two crossbreed soldiers both went down on one knee and lowered their heads, as was customary for those other than pure dragons who were in the presence of any dragon noble.

Kralthorix looked around and seemed to smile. The mature flame dragon looked down at Reira and Andrea and said, “Daughter, I have heard that you some important intelligence for us?”

Reira raised her head and replied, “Yes, father. After reviewing various captured enemy documents, I have been able to confirm that the Terranoran Army is employing elite squads of soldiers with an unusually high number of spellcasters in their efforts to stop our invasion. They call these units ‘Special Actions Platoons.’ I do not know for sure, but I believe that our defeats at Aryso and Playamar were likely because of interference from such elite platoons.”

Ralshenkus nodded slowly, the elder dragon responded, “I see. The enemy hopes to counter our greater numbers with small, yet mighty units. However, I refuse to believe that their veteran soldiers will be enough to effectively counter the forces we will bring to bear on the Great Plains of Salmanca.”

Kralthorix added, “We are still on schedule to gather our forces here and make our grand offensive against the Terranorans’ main defensive line by the end of the next two weeks.”

Ralshenkus added, “They are calling the defenses we must push past the ‘Woodstock Line.’ I will consider the death of the enemy’s commanding General, Sandra Woodstock, a key objective in this battle. One that I will strongly consider deploying personally in order to see completed.”

Kralthorix looked vaguely surprised. Reira knew that Lord Ralshenkus was an extremely formidable combatant. However, he believed that he should only risk his own life in battle if doing so could lead to a great boon to his cause. Her father often held the same opinion. However, he had proven himself far more willing to personally enter battle in order to bring his personal might to bear.

Reira continued, “I have also come to conclude that a circle of druids operating out of a forest not far from Agharta came to the aid of the Terranoran Army when the Aryso region was under attack from our forces. It would be wise of us, in my opinion, to expect the same druids to pose an obstacle to our advance into Agharta. They could even join the main Terranoran force at the Woodstock Line.”

Kralthorix nodded. He then mentioned, “The pretender Mirana has still not yet sent her armies to aid the Domain of Terranor. I wonder if I will get the chance to face her myself when she does? I would gladly rip out her throat and she would certainly do the same to me if given the chance.”

Ralshenkus shook his head and sternly told Kralthorix, “We want our enemies to remain divided and self-interested for now. Once the Domain has been defeated, we can easily overwhelm the lesser states of this continent. We have already sustained more losses in this campaign than I expected we would. These Terranorans and their ‘Special Actions Squads’ have proven far more
dangerous foes than even I could have predicted. Still, I believe that once we smash through their Woodstock Line and take Agharta, their morale will crumble and we will see the end of their Domain.”

Kralthorix reminded Ralshenkus, “Regardless of how thoroughly we crush their uniformed military, we would be foolish not to expect armed resistance from some members of the local populace for the foreseeable future. Both of us remember what happened back in our home realms. What we have yet to entirely destroy even though it sprung up in our own lands. The sort of force that killed my own uncle and predecessor.”

Reira cringed a bit, remembering her greatest failure in her service to her father. She knew that one of these days, she would prove herself to her father by bringing the most wanted traitor in the Flame Dragon Lands to justice.

Ralshenkus just nodded and told Kralthorix, “There are always those who would dare to resist their rightful rulers. The powerful enemy of the defeated House Arthus, the one known as the ‘Flamehawk,’ certainly comes to mind. However, that truth will not stop me from doing what should have been done by our kind centuries ago. Even if it takes us a thousand years, we will bring Austean back under the authority of her first sentient children. To fail in that task would be to allow disorder and idiocy to rule forevermore.”

Kralthorix simply remarked, “Your will remains ironclad as ever, Forest Lord. I will take command of this fortress as we discussed previously. I wish you best of luck and happy hunting as you lead our grand armies north to confront the Terranorans at Salmanca.”

Ralshenkus nodded and told Kralthorix, “See to it that this stronghold is secured and ready to withstand a hostile counterassault if need be. I will be off to check if any messages from Dalugon have come in today.” The massive forest dragon leapt into the air and flew over the northern wall, leaving Reira and Andrea with Kralthorix.

Reira wasted no time asking her father, “What do you wish of me?”

Kralthorix looked down at his half-human daughter and told her, “Your Red Claws are to go with Lord Ralshenkus as he leads our armies north to the Woodstock Line. Remember this, Reira, whether you fight on my orders or another lord’s, you fight for the salvation of this world from itself. Dragonkind will retake Austean and bring about an end to the strife and warfare that the humanoid states have brought about. Just be glad that you are on the correct side of the future, unlike your mother… and your older sister.”

Reira bowed to her father and told him, “Of course… it is an honor to have draconic blood in my veins. Nobody will stop our armies’ advance if I have anything to say about it.”

Kralthorix nodded as Reira took her leave with Andrea in tow. He seemed to be thinking about something. The flame dragon did not disclose what it was.

As Reira and Andrea headed to the main gate to meet up with the rest of their squad, Reira thought, “I will make my father proud. He will regret not seeing greater potential in me earlier. I will prove to him that I can do the job that was once meant for Kalia.”

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Two weeks passed after Lily and her platoon arrived at the Woodstock Line. The Terranoran Army Corps of Engineers and whatever civilian workers they could recruit had worked feverishly to dig trenches and build up all sorts of structures across the multiple-mile long stretch of
It was possible for the DRA to try and flank around the Terranoran defenses. However, their main force would likely be big and slow enough that the Terranorans would have time to launch a counter-maneuver before the enemy could close in on Agharta. General Sandra Woodstock, now attended to directly by her daughter Tanya, was hoping for a decisive battle to take place at the Woodstock Line. If the DRA failed to pass north of the Salmanca Plains, then the hard work of retaking Sandgate and then Ruvia could begin once the enemy was in retreat.

It was clear by this point that the DRA’s main force was now on its way north from Sandgate Fortress. They seemed to also want to fight a decisive battle as they had been reported to be making a direct beeline for the Woodstock Line.

Thankfully, Liliana DeepTree’s Central Circle had arrived recently to help bolster the Terranor defenders. Most of the United Church’s militia was also now based at the Woodstock Line. Layla, the flame dragon daughter of the Flame Duchess Mirana had traveled to Salmanca along with Flamehawk Squadron in her human form. She fully intended to help Lily’s platoon defend Agharta from the advancing DRA. Captain Joland had been given permission to have Layla fight alongside Sergeant Chuck Adams’ detachment. They were in need of a new member since they had lost two soldiers during the battle for the Aryso region.

Ultimately, thousands of Terranorans, and a few foreigners, had gathered on the plains of Salmanca to give it their all to defend Agharta from the invading Dalugonians. Pretty much every sentient species in Terranor was represented in the forces that had gathered, including a small number of earth dragons and noble dragons. Hopes had been rising that the Northern Mutual Defense Coalition was going to send its full military might south soon. However, no confirmation had yet arrived. Headway was also apparently being made to gain the aid of the Republic of Fadalia’s army and navy. However, the Fadalians had made no formal declaration of intent to send forces to Terranor. As for the Flame Duchy, they had not sent out many communications since the war had begun. What actions they would take now, if any, was anybody’s guess. Layla still hoped that her mother would come through sooner rather than later.

One morning, alarm sirens and bells were going off across the expansive Woodstock Line. Whole squadrons of soldiers were scrambling for action, as were flights of airplanes and airships. Captain Joland had already told her subordinates that their unit had been given the job of holding the far-left flank of the Woodstock Line. Their designated position was at the eastern edge of the trenches. Sergeant Chuck Adams led his six soldiers, including Layla in her dragon form, to their positions, just as they had been planning. Everyone had all of their combat gear at the ready. This was the fight they had spent the last two weeks preparing for. This was the first day of the battle that would likely decide the fate of Terranor.
The Clash at Salmanca

Lily and her squadmates had just reached their positions in a trench at the far eastern edge of the Woodstock Line. To the west, eleven other Special Actions Platoons had been spaced out across the immense length of the defensive line in order to best support their less-experienced allies. Lily still found it a prestigious honor that she had been assigned to and allowed to stay in such a unit. As for Major Tanya Woodstock, she had been ordered to attend to her mother, General Sandra Woodstock at her hilltop central command post for the duration of the battle.

Terranoran Air Corps airships, fighters and bombers flew overhead. It was likely that their main goals would be taking down some of the DRA’s airships and stopping enemy aircraft from strafing, or bombing, the Terranoran defenses. As all seven members of the detachment took their positions alongside two machine gun crews, Elisa scanned the plains to the south through the scope of her sniper rifle. Haley took out her binoculars and looked over the advancing DRA formations.

Lily noticed a pair of light cannons being loaded behind her detachment. They were most likely going to wait until enemy units were confirmed to be in range. Lily also noticed at least fifteen enemy airships in the distance floating menacingly far above the main enemy force. She could vaguely make out DRA Manticore fighters escorting the airships. Some larger flying shapes in the distance indicated the presence of the three-engine biplane bombers codenamed “Firestorm” by the DRA’s air corps.

Haley suddenly exclaimed, “There are thousands of the bastards out there! There are plenty of vargs, giants and dragons as well. They knew that they would need a really big force if they wanted to advance past this line, and they certainly brought one.”

Howard added, “Who knows how many reserves they have waiting behind the primary force? This could be quite the drawn-out fight. It could even take multiple days for a clear winner to emerge.”

Elisa sighed, “Well, we sure could use celestials falling from the sky right now. Shame that they seem to have abandoned this world with the exception of occasional summons.”

Chuck seemed slightly annoyed by Elisa’s last statement. Howard looked to share in his Sergeant’s frustration. However, Chuck simply said, “We have our jobs to do here. We need to stop any DRA units from outflanking the line on this side. If Selina and her comrades in the Air Corps do their job, we won’t have to worry about being overwhelmed by enemy aircraft.”

Lily admitted, “This is going to be the largest battle I have ever been in by far. I just hope that my magic holds out and I don’t get exhausted from continuous spellcasting.”

Tala admitted, “The same goes for me as well. Thankfully, we won’t be the ones taking the brunt of the enemy force. They will probably be heading for the center of the line.”

Howard pointed out, “The DRA came right to us. Therefore, they want to win a decisive victory here. From what we know of them, their leadership won’t care how many soldiers they lose, within reason, as long as they break the line. That is why they did not bother to dig their own trenches, or set up other defenses, just to the south of here.”

Haley called out, “The enemy formations are picking up speed. They will be in artillery range of the main line soon!”
Before Lily could reply, the thundering sound of dozens of heavy mortars firing from behind the main line could be heard. A series of artillery shells streaked over the Woodstock Line and crashed into various points in and around the DRA formation.

The DRA’s massive troops formations were now easily visible as they charged forward across the plains of Salamanca. Hundreds upon hundreds of the armored figures were supported by towering giants, many of them with obvious dragon ancestry. Packs of vargs and other semi-sentient creatures such as wyverns rushed ahead of the main DRA force. They were likely intended to absorb some Terranoran gunfire and spells that otherwise would have taken out some of the DRA’s massed infantry.

A couple dozen or more enemy dragons could now be seen spread out across the advancing DRA battalions. They were leading from behind for now. From what Lily understood of the DRA and their tactics, they did not want to risk too many dragons in open battle without allowing the enemy to be softened up by their weaker soldiers first.

Now, the two sides’ aircraft were beginning to engage each other in the skies. Airships opened fire on each other with cannons at long range. Fighters began to dogfight and try intercept enemy bombers. As for the bombers, the DRA’s Firestorm units flew in low to try and get into position to drop bombs on the Woodstock Line itself. However, the line had been built with several anti-aircraft batteries installed, which would make reaching it a challenge for the DRA’s bombers. As for the Terranoran Stingray bombers, they were climbing to a higher altitude along with their fighter escorts. Their goal was to drop bombs on the enemy’s airships first and foremost. Overall, the DRA had more airships present than the Terranorans did. However, the Terranorans had been able to deploy far more airplanes than the DRA could. That left the outcome of the battle for the skies above Salamanca in question.

As light cannons and anti-aircraft guns opened fire along the Woodstock Line, hostile artillery fire streaked over the main DRA force. Many of the shells fell short of the Woodstock Line. However, some of them did impact targets along the line. Lily hoped that the Terranoran artillery units, or the Air Corps, could destroy some of the enemy’s heavy mortars before they did too much damage.

Time seemed to move at a different pace as the DRA front ranks closed in on the southern trenches of the Woodstock Line. Machine gun and rifle fire now streaked out from both sides in massive quantities. DRA half-tracks were advancing forward along with their frontline infantry.

As Lily watched the massive battle unfolding to the immediate west, Elisa called out, “Ready everyone! We have enemies coming our way!”

Lily reflexively shot out a hand and conjured up a force shield. Tala did the same as the remaining members of the detachment looked out onto their section of plains. What they saw was a small pack of creatures that looked like wingless, tan dragons with sharp, curved, teeth and large claws darting towards them at high speed. Coming in not far behind the land drakes were a few large wolf-like creatures with acidic saliva dripping from their mouths. These seemed to be the first wave of DRA units sent to outflank the Terranoran defenses.

The machine guns and light cannons in the detachment’s vicinity opened fire as the majority of the hostile creatures moved in to attack the bulk of Flamehawk Squadron directly to the west.

Chuck called out, “Those drakes are coming in fast and zig-zagging quite a bit. Still, the earth vargs behind them should still hit just as hard if they reach us.”

Elisa seemed to glow slightly. She then lined up a shot with supernatural precision and dropped a drake with a single headshot. Tala flung a dagger of ice into another drake’s leg, which
slowed it down just enough for Haley to gun it down with her rifle.

Howard used a blast of sound and purple lighting to stunt a drake, Lily promptly finished it with a devastating blast of sound. That being the newer spell she had been practicing back in Playamar.

As Haley reloaded, Chuck sent a flaming meteor out to smash the skull of a drake that had been weakened by machine gun fire. A well-aimed light cannon shell blew one of the earth vargs to pieces, as the others continued their charge.

Layla conjured up a force shield of her own using a claw, much to Lily and Tala’s surprise. They had not seen such an obviously young dragon cast magic before. However, for the time being she stayed in the trench.

Suddenly, Lily and Tala’s force shields were both weakened by single, high-velocity bullets coming from the south. Elisa called out, “Enemy snipers are moving in behind the chargers!”

Lily mentally admitted to not having encountered many DRA snipers before as she ducked into the trench to avoid further enemy fire. From what she knew, it made sense that the DRA did not want to invest too much of their resources into giving the vast majority of their humanoid soldiers specialized training. That was also probably why she had not encountered all that many DRA spellcasters before.

Elisa kept her focus and nailed one enemy sniper with a headshot. Haley and Chuck readied their rifles to counter-fire as the machine guns kept blazing. Howard seemed prepared to provide any necessary healing as he held out his heavy shield and fired a beam of purple light from his warhammer into one wounded enemy drake’s head, killing him.

As a pair of DRA snipers were blown into the air by a light cannon shell, Lily stood up and saw one of the enemy snipers readying herself to take a shot at Haley. Lily quickly fired off a barrage of force rockets into the air, which then came crashing down on the enemy, blasting her into a bloody pulp.

Chuck dropped one enemy sniper with his rifle as the hostile tried to go prone. However, the remaining drakes and earth vargs were closing in on the trench now. Tala unleashed a rapid blast of freezing wind onto two incoming drakes, stopping them from reaching the trench and making them highly vulnerable to machine gun fire. The last enemy drake leapt at Haley. However, it was incinerated by Haley’s flaming breath.

Layla used her wings to leap out of the trench now, as an enemy sniper’s bullet weakened her force shield. Two earth vargs charged her. However, they were both immolated by her fiery exhalation, which was even more intense than Haley’s or Howards. With the two machine guns now focusing on the few DRA snipers still standing. Layla rushed forward to engage the final earth varg left in the area in melee. The two creatures fought viciously and Layla’s force shield was shattered in the fight. However, the young dragoness was able to clamp her jaws around the earth varg’s neck and bring a swift end to its life.

As Layla took flight to return to the relative safety of the trench, Elisa pointed out, “A pair of enemy infantry squads backed by a half-track are moving in to engage Flamehawk 1. Should we provide assistance, Sergeant?”

Before Chuck could say anything in response, Howard pointed out, “I see a small enemy infantry unit trying to outflank us! Their uniforms look somewhat different and at least two of them look kind of like Haley.”
Lily had something else on her mind at the moment, she was currently looking up to the southeast. She called out, “What about that airship? It’s not displaying the colors of either army… Look at the size of it!”

A massive dark green airship bristling with machine guns and light cannons was coming in fast from the southeast. It was at least a third larger than the military airships deployed by either the Terranoran Air Corps or their DRA enemies. Its main guns began to open fire on the DRA airships in the distance, much to Lily’s relief. The machine guns mounted on the vehicle were focused on attacking any DRA airplanes that came into range.

As for the enemies on the ground, there was a unit of around fifteen DRA soldiers trying to skirt the battle and get around the detachment. At this time, the rest of Flamehawk Squadron was engaging the enemy infantry coming right for them. Captain Joland had blown up the enemy half-track with an Inferno Burst in short order. Upon closer inspection, the enemy unit in the distance did include two half-flame dragon women and three heavily-armored soldiers with tall horned helmets Lily did not recognize. These soldiers also had darker gray armor than the average DRA grunts did. There were elements of black in some of their uniforms.

Elisa took a shot at one of the enemy soldiers in the distance, saying, “We will find out the deal with that airship later.” As usual, Elisa landed a headshot, killing a light infantryman standing next to one of the enemy half-dragons.

Haley took aim with her rifle as the enemy soldiers changed course and made a beeline for the detachment. She said, “That airship looks to be one owned by the House Arthus of Northern Dalugon. I thought they had been wiped out by the DRA months ago?”

The two machine gun turrets took aim at the advancing DRA unit. However, two of the enemies wearing tall helmets fired off beams of green light from their curved swords, which sliced into the machine guns and stopped them from being able fire.

Howard called out, “DRA chaplains? They are wearing too much armor to be arcanists!”

One of the two light cannons got off a shot which blew a pair of enemy soldiers to bits when it struck the ground. However, as the second light cannon was loading a shell, it was destroyed by a well-aimed light beam from the third enemy chaplain. Both of its gunners were consumed in a blast of fire as the shell being loaded ignited and detonated.

An enemy soldier wearing light armor and a ridged helmet tossed a spear of acid into the first light cannon, preventing its further use. She was clearly a DRA arcanist.

Chuck, Haley and Elisa opened fire as Tala and Lily replenished their force shields and Howard conjured an aura of purple fire around himself. Layla conjured a new force shield as the dark green airship continued to close in on the detachment’s position.

One of the two enemy half-dragons suddenly glowed brightly and dashed forward, trying to close with the trench while covered by her soldiers. The second half dragon ran in behind her as fast as she could while firing into the trench with her rifle.

Haley and Howard both got out of the trench, Howard announced, “I am going to engage the enemy chaplains! I must prove that my faith and my god are stronger than theirs regardless of whatever they believe in!”

As bullets continued to fly from both sides and the machine gunners went for their rifles, Haley drew her kukris and called out, “I am not letting that enemy half-dragon light up our trench!”
Haley rushed towards the glowing enemy half-dragon, who Lily was pretty sure had to be an officer by now. Layla conjured a sphere of fire in her claws and launched it at an enemy soldier. However, right after the sphere struck its intended target, he was healed by a pulse of green light from the nearest chaplain.

As Howard and Haley advanced and Layla leapt out of the trench, taking heavy enemy fire in the process. Lily unloaded her pistol at the enemy, trying to cover Haley as best as she could.

Tala tossed a dagger of ice into the second enemy half-dragon. The frozen blade sliced into the enemy’s chest and blood oozed from her mouth. The glowing half dragon looked back and shouted, “Andrea!”

As Lily realized that was the first time she had heard an enemy soldier address one of their comrades by name, a DRA Chaplain ran over and channeled a bright pulse of bright green light into the dying half-dragoness, who grimaced and quickly reloaded her rifle.

Haley and the enemy officer how reached each other, the incoming DRA Lieutenant looked older and a bit taller than Haley. She drew a rapier, which Haley blocked with her kukris. The two half-human women began to duel fiercely as the dark green airship came ever closer.

Elisa managed to finally kill an enemy chaplain with a headshot. However, Howard was now moving in to engage his surviving fellows with his warhammer and shield out. Chuck also emerged from the trench and drew his spiked chain. Tala fired a sphere of freezing cold into another enemy soldier’s head, ending him.

Lily dodged a sphere of lightning from the enemy arcanist. However, she quickly countered with a soundwave that sliced into her and forced her to her knees. Howard was now effectively distracting the two enemy Chaplains well enough that the enemy arcanist could not be healed as she bled out.

Layla was now engaging the majority of the surviving enemies with Chuck’s help. Elisa shot an enemy chaplain in the stomach, allowing Howard to finish him with a blow to the head from his enflamed warhammer.

Lily, Tala and a few other Terranoran soldiers were covering their allies from the trench. It was now obvious to Lily that they were fighting DRA elites this time.

As Layla’s force shield was shattered by a full rifle clip from the second enemy half dragon, Lily heard an odd noise from above her. She looked up and saw that the House Arthus airship had dropped a large cargo box of some kind that was now having its descent slowed by parachutes.

The box landed, as the airship kept firing on the DRA’s airborne units in the distance. The front of it opened up and ten soldiers in dark green armor with turtle shell like helmets poured out. Twin beams of fire blasted one DRA heavy soldier to the ground as a redhead human woman wearing a white and gold coat with green shorts followed the soldiers into battle. She looked to be an officer of some kind, and an arcanist at that.

It was the final figure that emerged from the cargo that was the most unique in appearance. She was yet another half-flame dragon and she was wearing light chainmail armor with no insignia on it and black pants. She drew a rapier of her own, which burned with magical fire, and called out to the DRA Lieutenant who was dueling with Haley, “Reira, face me! You wanted me, little sis. Now, here I am!”
Reira saw the challenger as bullets flew around her, she shouted, “Kalia? It has been far too long!” She then told Haley, “Sorry, kid, but you are not the one I’ve been hunting for two decades!”

Reira delivered a solid kick to Haley’s stomach as the House Arthus troops moved in to assist Lily’s allies. Haley was knocked to the ground as Kalia and Reira charged towards each other.

The two half-dragon sisters crossed blades and snarled at each other. However, Reira was now down to only two remaining soldiers and Andrea left. She had lost her last chaplain to Howard mere seconds ago.

Lily was very confused as to what was going on. However, she and Tala each fired a sphere of energy into an enemy soldier. She also saw that Haley was watching the two older half-flame dragon women dueling violently with great interest as she was standing back up.

After dodging two claw swings and a bite from Layla and jumping back with her rapier out, Andrea told Reira, “We need to retreat, Lieutenant! I don’t think our main force is getting through their lines today.”

Reira nodded, telling Kalia as their weapons locked, “I don’t know why you are here now of all times. Still, you do not deserve that blade! This is far from over, sister.”

Kalia replied, as Andrea and the last DRA soldier began to rapidly retreat south, “You are badly outnumbered. I don’t want to hurt you of all people, even if you hate me now…”

Reira replied, as her last regular soldier was felled by a hail of gunfire, “I learned some tricks of my own since we last met. Of course, that has given me more than enough time.” Reira then jumped back away from Kalia and summoned a massive cloud of smoke with a swing of her open claw.

When the smoke cleared, Lily looked around and saw that Reira and Andrea seemed to have fled the scene successfully. She also saw that the new arrivals were regrouping and that the main force of Flamehawk Squadron had wiped out the DRA unit that had been advancing on them. As for the massive main DRA force, they were starting to fall back. However, there were still hundreds upon hundreds of enemies who would live to fight another day. Lily had a bad feeling that the enemy was trying to make an orderly retreat to minimize their losses before regrouping and trying again in the near future. Both sides had lost airships, airplanes, artillery units, half-tracks and plenty of soldiers in the epic clash. It was clear that the battle for Salmanca was still far from over.

As the House Arthus soldiers finished regrouping with their arcanist captain. Their airship hovered over the trench. Kalia, the mysterious new half-flame dragon, walked over to Haley. She told the younger half-human, “You did quite well holding off my younger sister for as long as you did. ...I have to ask, where did you get those two kukris of yours?”

Lily suddenly noticed that Kalia had a kukri that looked almost just like Haley’s at her belt. She held a hand in front of her mouth to stifle a gasp.

Haley replied, “I don’t know what exactly just happened. Still you did come to help us. So, if you must know, they were a gift from my mother. She left them with me at an orphanage along with a note. Funny thing, I still have the note…”

Kalia lunged forward and wrapped her arms tightly around Haley, who staggered back a bit. Tears streaked down the face of the older half-dragon as she said, “Haley! I knew that someday
I would see you again! You actually kept my note this whole time, I can’t believe it!”

Tala walked up to Lily as some pieces slowly began to come together in Lily’s mind.

Haley just stammered, “Mom?” To Kalia.

All that Kalia did in response was nod yes and hold Haley even tighter.
Kalia’s Story

Chapter Notes

There are a few things to unpack regarding this chapter. First, this was the first chapter that I wrote after my hiatus from writing this story, which had begun after I finished chapter 28. Second, this chapter has a pretty high density of references to Convergence. So, please do not worry too much about some things mentioned early in this chapter if you have not read that story. Finally, this is the first chapter where the references to rape and considered suicide I mentioned in this story’s opening notes appear. If memory serves, this is also the chapter where they are the most prevalent. I would still highly recommend reading this chapter, as it contains some critical information regarding the overall plot of this story. Anyway, thank you all for reading this story this far.

As the DRA forces in the distance made a strategic retreat back to their encampments, Lily’s mind was racing in multiple directions as she stood in the trench section her small detachment had been assigned to defend. Her squad had faced off against the first elite DRA humanoid infantry unit they had ever fought and won. However, they had been helped in their task by a small unit of soldiers from the, supposedly destroyed, House Arthus of Northern Dalugon. The House Arthus squad’s commander was a redheaded human woman who had lent her arcane prowess to the battle. The massive House Arthus airship they had arrived in and been dropped from was still in air and firing on the retreating enemy formations.

What had been the most shocking development by far was the arrival of a half-flame dragon woman who Lily only knew as Kalia. Kalia wore no army’s uniform, but had arrived with the soldiers of the House Arthus. More importantly, she had engaged the half-flame dragon DRA Lieutenant known to Lily only as Reira using a flaming rapier. The two women had recognized each other. Apparently, they were sisters. However, the two of them stood on opposite sides of the conflict and Reira had clearly been hunting Kalia for around two decades.

After the enemy had begun to retreat, Kalia had approached Haley, Lily’s first friend and the woman Lily believed was the love of her life, and asked her about her kukri knives. After a somewhat-confused Haley had explained the basic story to Kalia, the older half-dragoness had embraced Haley. It had now become obvious to everyone that Kalia was Haley’s long-lost mother. She was the one who had left her at the orphanage in Scralville in the hopes that she would be able lead a better life there. However, there were still a significant number of questions swirling around in Lily’s head. She was also not even sure if she was the right one to ask them.

Lily’s deep elf friend and squad mate Tala Guissel was smiling over at Haley and Kalia, who were still in an embrace. Tears were still flowing freely from Kalia’s eyes. Haley seemed to be experiencing a really broad mix of emotions at the moment. Tala seemed to think for a moment and then suggested, “If that’s Haley’s mother, than Haley must be at least a second-generation half-dragon.”

Lily snapped partially back into reality and asked Tala, “Second generation?”

Howard looked back into the trench and explained, as he walked over to regroup with the
rest of the detachment, “I am a first generation half-dragon. My father is a dragon and my mother is a human. However, it is possible for a pair of half-dragons to have their own children. If the parents’ draconic lineage is from two different species, than the child will have the traits of either parent’s lineage, rather than a combination of the two.”

Tala nodded and pointed out, “I still think that our new allies’ arrival brings up a lot of questions. How did any of the House Arthus’ soldiers survive and abscond with such a massive combat airship? Also, how is Kalia connected to the DRA? Why was she fighting her own sister?…”

Suddenly, as Lily was about to add the question of why Kalia left her daughter at the orphanage in the first place, she saw the mother and daughter pair finally releasing each other.

Kalia told Haley, “I am sure that you have your whole life to catch me up on and I want to hear every word of it. I also have quite a bit to tell you as well. You deserve to finally hear the full truth, including what I did not put in the note I left you with. I can also explain what happened between your Aunt Reira and I. Still, I need to speak with someone high up in the Terranoran Army. I know who is behind the DRA menace at the highest level of its command structure.”

Chuck walked over to the mother and daughter pair. Before Haley could reply to her mother, he told Kalia, “I might be able to help you with that. Sergeant Chuck Adams at your service. If you are truly Private Haley’s mother, than you should be proud to know that your daughter has been a real model soldier ever since her assignment to my detachment. She even earned a medal for her distinguished service.”

Haley looked a bit awkward as her mother smiled a toothy smile over at her. Her face took on a more serious look as Lily, Tala and Elisa walked over to them. Haley told Kalia, “I want you to know everything that has happened in my life. All I want in exchange is to know about your life. Specifically, what were you trying to protect me from, or keep me away from, when you left me at the orphanage.”

Kalia nodded at her daughter and then shook Chuck’s hand. She told him, as the detachment regrouped, “Kalia Strongwind at your service, Sergeant. I must ask to see your commanding officer as soon as they are available to speak with me. Please tell them that I have urgent information for the Terranoran leadership here.”

Elisa pointed out, “I see our Captain and Lieutenant coming this way right now… they seem quite perplexed and confused…”

Lily had noticed that the small House Arthus squad was now standing around their arcanist captain. The redheaded woman’s jaw had dropped and she was starting in stunned disbelief at the incoming Elena Joland and Juliana Carlton. The woman put her head in her hands and stammered, “Seriously, you two! The first Terranoran officers I run into upon arriving here are you two bastards?”

All eyes were now on Elena and Juliana as Juliana exasperatedly replied, “You lived? We thought the House Arthus had been crushed by the DRA!”

Elena simply chuckled, “You really are a survivor, Lilia Heliopolis.” To the House Arthus Captain.

Lilia folded her arms and seemed to regain some of her composure. She then asked, “Ok, the multiverse continues to fuck with me in all sorts of ways, I see. Still, I am here… we are here to aid the Terranoran Army in defeating the DRA. I want to meet with some higher-ranking officer to
explain my squad and airship’s purpose here. By the way, where are your three buddies exactly?”

Juliana replied, “They are hopefully somewhere safer than here. We have not seen them in years.”

Elena told Lilia, “Before you ask, the last DWD is at the Agharta Academy of Magic. It was in pieces for a reverse-engineering attempt the last time I checked in on it. It will not be of any help to us right now.”

Lily decided to finally ask, “My head may be spinning now, but how exactly do all of you know each other?”

Elena explained, “Lilia here is an old enemy or ours. We parted last time on a truce of sorts with the broader House Arthus. However, I still slew Lilia’s megalomaniacal magic teacher Tom Arthus soon after that.”

Lilia admitted, “He was undeniably caught up with the wrong crowd. However, don’t think that you two can be so easily forgiven for all the House Arthus casualties you caused in your ‘adventures,’ even if the end result worked out for most parties involved. We are here to help put an end to the DRA, but we also intend to rebuild our society once this war is over and won. Now, please direct us to the appropriate authority figure. We will also need a place for the Syfal to land.”

Lily was pretty sure that the Syfal had to be the massive military airship that had delivered Lilia, her squad and Kalia Strongwind to the plains of Salmanca. As she was still trying to process all of the developments that had just occurred, she heard Haley saying, “Strongwind… Strongwind… I guess that that’s my last name? I never had one of those before…”

Kalia smiled to her daughter and explained, “That is your last name, Haley. It was my mother’s last name before it was mine and my sister’s. Regardless, I never identified you with my surname in my note for your own protection. I did not want my enemies to find you in Scralville. However, it seems as though you have found yourself here in Terranor just as the fight has been brought north across the Kalatian Ocean.”

Elena looked over and asked, “What is going on with Haley and that other half-dragon woman? She does not look like another House Arthus soldier to me.”

Tala casually told her Captain, “She is Kalia Strongwind, Haley’s mother apparently. We just fought a DRA unit that was led by Kalia’s sister…”

Elena looked quite stunned and Juliana sighed. The Priestess Lieutenant admitted, “At this point, nothing can really surprise me anymore. We should send someone to go and report to Major Woodstock. I have a feeling that she will want to hear all about this.”

Elisa simply looked around for a moment, saluted Juliana and said, “I will get on that, ma’am.”

As Elisa left in a hurry, Chuck called out, “Can someone contact the engineering division and make sure that they can mark out a landing site for the Syfal?”

A couple of Flamehawk Squadron soldiers went off to try and fulfil Chuck’s request. Lily walked carefully over to Haley. As she did so, Haley told Kalia, “So, I’m Haley Strongwind. I wonder if I need to change my enlistment papers at all now?”

Kalia shrugged her shoulders and told her daughter, “What is more important is that you and your superiors hear what I have to say. Also, of course, that you tell me all about your life thus
Haley nodded as Lily stood just a bit behind her somewhat awkwardly. Kalia saw Lily and asked, “Who is this girl? A squad mate of yours I take it?”

Before Lily could say a word, Haley told Kalia, “This is Lily, she is a friend of mine who I met after coming to Terranor. Admittedly, we did not meet in the best of places. Still, she has loyally stood by me ever since we first got to know each other.”

Lily easily noticed the emphasis that Haley had put on the word “friend.” She sighed a slight bit. However, she simply nodded in response to Haley’s statement and told Kalia, “Your daughter is one of the nicest, bravest and most compassionate people that I have ever met. I have been grateful every single day since I met Haley that she is in my life.”

Mother and daughter both gave Lily somewhat surprised looks. However, Kalia replied, “That is certainly glowing praise… I guess that you have made quite the impression on quite a few folks, Haley.”

Haley nodded and then added, “I will have to show you my medal when I get the chance. Lily sort of recommended me for it after an earlier battle we took part in.”

Kalia nodded approving at her daughter and at Lily. She replied, “While we are waiting for someone with the appropriate rank to arrive, I do want to hear about how your life has gone, Haley. That includes how you met your friend Lily here.”

Haley nodded and, as the other members of Flamehawk Squadron and the new House Arthus reinforcements busied themselves hauling debris off the battlefield and taking stock of casualties and lost equipment, she began to tell Kalia about her life. She started from when she was very young in the Scralville Orphanage and ended with her successes as a Private in the Terranoran Army. The biggest thing she omitted was Lily’s recent confession of love. Haley did not mind the omission all that much. Haley also confessed to her mother that she was bisexual. However, Kalia did not seem to care much about her daughter’s sexual orientation. What did concern her was that her child had ended up in prison. However, Kalia came to understand the circumstances that had landed Haley in a high-security cell. Most of all Kalia was overjoyed to finally be reunited with her daughter. She also made it clear that Haley was her only child. As Lily listened to Haley recounting her life story to Kalia, she realized that there had been no mention of who Haley’s father was or where he was now so far.

That evening, just after dinner, the members of Lily’s detachment, other than Layla, were gathered with Elena, Juliana, Ruby, Emily, Emmet, Tanya, Hitomi, Lilia, and Kalia in Tanya’s briefing tent. There was a map of the Dalugonian Continent sitting on the main table inside of the tent.

Lilia’s comrades had managed to land the Syfal and convince Major Woodstock that they were all on the same side this time. Also, Kalia had managed to impart to Tanya that she had important information for the Terranoran High Command. Tanya’s mother, General Sandra Woodstock, had ordered her to receive Kalia’s intel, along with some other officers that she trusted. Haley had gotten permission for the rest of her detachment to be present at the meeting.

Kalia walked over to the map of Dalugon and then explained, “I will start by giving you all of my most militarily important intelligence. Then, I will talk about my own personal history for whoever is willing to listen.”

Tanya looked over to Kalia and told her, “You were said to know who is behind the DRA.
Kalia nodded and then explained, “The Supreme Commander of the DRA is a forest dragon named Ralshenkus. He is the current Lord of the Forest Dragons and has held that office for around two centuries. Ralshenkus, to my knowledge, believes that the humanoid-run nations of Austean should be subjugated for their own good. He wants to place the entire world under the rule of a draconic empire that he would sit on the throne of. He has the full support of Lotharax, the Lord of the Desert Dragons and Kralthorix the Lord of the Flame Dragons… the fiend that I regret to inform you is my biological father. Ralshenkus also commands the loyalty of the current Swamp Dragon Lord, even though some of his subjects are not fully sold on the DRA’s plans yet. There are three other dragon rulers that tentatively support Ralshenkus’s plot to seize control of the world for dragonkind. These are the Noble Dragon Lord, the Foothill Dragon Lord and the Earth Dragon Lady. Already, the DRA has slain the Lady of the Sea Dragons and imprisoned or killed many of her subjects and vassals, since she was the only dragon ruler fully and violently opposed to their reconquest scheme. Ralshenkus’s plan is known as Operation Grand Destiny. It starts with the conquest of Terranor and would involve using this continent as a base to advance on the other humanoid-rulled nations of Austean. The DRA supposedly intends to take on Fadalia last, after conquering all other major nations.”

As everyone in the room did their best to process what Kalia had just told them, Lily came to realize that Kalia had to be a defector of some kind. She had abandoned her own father’s faction at some point. That had to explain her fighting with her DRA officer sister, Reira. This also meant that Haley was Kralthorix’s granddaughter. Lily was not sure how Haley was taking that news. Her first friend stayed fixated on her mother the whole time that she had been talking.

Tanya broke the brief silence by asking Kalia, “Miss Strongwind, how did you come to know all of this information?”

Kalia replied, “Because, for the last roughly twenty years, I have been working as a leader in one of the dwindling resistance movements in southern Dalugon. I only recently linked up with Captain Heliopolis here after she escaped the near-complete destruction of the House Arthus by the DRA. After leaving a half-sea dragon associate of mine named Niala Hartmann in charge of my limited forces back home, I helped the remnants of the House Arthus steal the impounded military airship, Syfal, back from the DRA.”

Lilia added, “Kalia convinced me that coming to Terranor and aiding the Domain’s armies was the best way that we could fight the DRA and their masters. We avoided the main enemy shipping lanes and used intercepted radio transmissions to discover what was happening at Salmanca. That was when we flew into battle with no time to explain ourselves. When Kalia saw her younger sister below, she decided to personally deploy and my squad went down along with her.”

Tanya nodded and then Kalia pointed out, “I wish I had more details to give you, Major. You must surely already know how relentless the enemies we all face are. They are driven by a sincere conviction in the superiority of their system and of draconic rule. The Dragon Lords who control the DRA will not stop until the world is theirs, or they are dead. Now, I think it is time that I explain myself more fully to my daughter, if that is alright with you.”

Tanya said, “I will report what you have told us to my mother immediately. Captain Benson, you are with me.”

Emmet saluted his fiancé and the two of them left the command tent. Everyone else stayed for the moment as Kalia looked Haley in the eyes as best as she could.
Haley stammered, “My grandfather is one of the enemy commanders? One of the ones behind this whole mess?”

Kalia took her daughter’s hand, sighed as deeply as Lily had heard anyone sigh and told her, “Haley, I hate to tell you of all people this, but it is far worse than just that.”

Lily remembered that the Flame Duchess Mirana had told her own daughter Layla that Kralthorix had despicable attitudes towards females. She knew that whatever Kalia was going to tell Haley and the rest of the soldiers present, it would not be pretty.

Kalia began, “Kralthorix did not succeed his own father on the throne of the Flame Dragons. The last holder of the high office was his uncle. The reason that said uncle was out of the way for Kralthorix to succeed him was because a band of elite anti-dragon rule resistance fighters managed to mount an unexpected surprise attack on his palace and slay him before a successful defense could be mounted. When my father took the throne, he was young for a Dragon Lord. He also inherited his uncle’s alliances with the scheming and ruthless Lord Ralshenkus and Ralshenkus’s long term loyal ally Lord Lotharax. Kralthorix used his allies help to suppress the resistance as best as he could and force them underground. However, they made one last attempt to assassinate Kralthorix, hoping to repeat the victory that had indirectly placed him on the throne in the first place. This time, the resistance failed handily to kill the Lord of the Flame Dragons. One of the captives taken from the failed raid was a human adventuress named Emma Strongwind… my mother.”

The room was completely silent as Kalia took a very deep breath and continued, “Kralthorix was always wantonly lustful for a Dragon Lord. He would allow himself to engage in cruel and callous behavior that he would not necessarily permit from his subjects. He took a dark and twisted fancy to my mother soon after she became his prisoner. He raped her repeatedly and forced her to bear him two half-dragon daughters. Those being myself and my younger sister, Reira Strongwind. Eventually, my mother ceased to be a major object of his vile affections. She was left in her cell to rot and occasionally be visited by her daughters. Kralthorix intended to torment her by exposing her to us. However, she eventually managed to get through to me what a monster my father really was. She never expressed open hatred towards me, or Reira. As I entered my teenage years, my father started having me train to become his personal assassin. Despite all of the doting affection Kralthorix poured over me, I started to think I was just a tool to him. I started to think that I was a monster. I started to think that I was unworthy of life.”

Haley was clearly horrified by all that she was hearing. So was everyone else in the tent. Most of the people there were women, after all. Lily had no idea what she could do to comfort her beloved without obviously overstepping her boundaries. However, Kalia could also see the emotional pain her daughter was in. She took Haley’s clawed hands in hers and told her daughter, “Haley, the good news is that you were conceived in love. I never suffered my mother’s cruel fate. It is time that I talk about your father. The man who saved me from myself and the only man I have ever loved.”

Haley looked Kalia in the eyes and asked her, “My father… the way that you are talking about him… he’s dead, isn’t he?”

Kalia nodded slowly and continued, “Yes, Scallarix, your father, is long dead. Let me explain… Scallarix was the half-human son of Ralshenkus himself. He never knew his own mother. However, he knew me well from a young age. As luck would have it, he caught me when I was extremely close to stabbing myself in the throat, so that my father could not use me to cause anyone any more harm. Scallarix talked me out of my suicidal state and told me that he had loved me for years. He gave me something to live for and we became lovers. Even though our fathers
would have almost certainly allowed us to marry, we defected to the resistance together, intending to make the evil dragons pay for all that they had done. Of course, that plan failed. Reira did not follow us in our defection, she stayed by the side of the father that had rarely acknowledged her beforehand. Also, Emma Strongwind was executed on Kralthorix’s orders on account of my betrayal. When I became pregnant with you, Haley, he insisted that I be kept out of the action. It was while I was pregnant that Scallarix lead his fighters into action to defend myself and some others who were fleeing our discovered hideout. I later learned that Ralshenkus had appeared on the battlefield and engaged Scallarix. He killed his own son while declaring that nobody would stop the world-changing plan that he had in the works. I now believe that that plan was and is *Operation Grand Destiny*. I was left alone, expect for my unborn child and the resistance fighters who remained. I decided to live on for the sake of my slain lover. However, I knew that the life I would have to lead was not one that I could allow my offspring to be born into. …Haley, I left you at the orphanage in Scralville in disguise so that you would be safe and far away from your twisted grandfathers. In the end, Scralville fell after you left her for Terranor. I have been doing what I could to fight the evil dragon rulers and later the DRA for the last twenty years. Only recently did I link up with the survivors of the House Arthus’s destruction. Now, fate, cruel as it has been to me, has led me back to you. I love you, Haley. I always have and I sent you away from me because of my love for you.”

Haley clenched her fists as all eyes on the tent were on her. Lily felt horrible on behalf of the young woman she loved. Then, Haley tearfully embraced her mother and told her, “I understand it all now, everything that you just told me. I love you too, mom. I really do. I wish that I could have met my father and your mother… However, what matters is that you are here right now. I always wanted to meet you someday and now I’ve gotten my wish. We ARE going to set this right, mom.”

Elena raised a fist brimming with arcane fire. She then confidently pointed out, “We will get those sons of bitches, that is for sure. Come on, everyone, we should leave Kalia and Haley alone for a bit. I know what it is like to be without your parents for years. Also, the DRA is almost certainly going to attack the Woodstock Line again tomorrow, we need to be ready for them then.”

Lily was the last one out of the tent as Haley and her mother were left alone. She got one last look at mother and daughter and thought, “Captain Joland is right, we have to kill Kralthorix, Ralshenkus and all who stand with them. I will do whatever I can to put an end to this monstrous war, for my friends and for Haley.”

As Lily headed off to get some rest, she hoped that Haley would be ok. She knew that she would have to do her best to be there for her, even if she just had to be there for her beloved as her friend.
The Last Woodstocks

It was early morning the day after the great clash at Salmanca had begun. Lily, having received no other orders, was waiting outside her tent in her full uniform. To say that the day before had been insane was an understatement in her opinion. From the battle itself, to the reveal of Haley’s parentage and the dark and twisted history behind it, to the return of an old foe of her commanding officers who was now fighting on the same side as the Terranorans, things had sure gotten bizarre fast.

As Lily was awaiting her orders and looking up at the morning sky that would almost certainly soon be filled with artillery shells and military aircraft, she heard Haley’s voice saying, “Hey Lil…”

Lily looked over and saw Haley Strongwind walking over to her. She had even more trouble than usual reading the expression on the young woman’s face as Haley closed in on her.

Haley just stood there for a moment. She then told Lily, “Two days ago, I had no idea who my family were. Now, I have met my mother… I now know for a fact that she loves me and that she left me in Scralville because she wanted to give me a better life…..”

Haley then looked into Lily’s eyes and told her, tears welling up, “The monsters behind the DRA… they are my own grandfathers… In another world, I could have been raised among our enemies. What sort of person would I have become with the poisonous influence of the evil dragon lords all around me?”

Lily walked right up to Haley and embraced her tightly. Haley put up no resistance and slowly wrapped her arms around Lily as well. Lily told Haley, “What matters is the person you are now, Hales. You are here with us, not with the enemy and so is your mother. You have done so much for me and the rest of our squad. Please, don’t fall apart on us now.”

Haley nodded and told Lily, “I won’t stop until my grandfathers are dead. Ralshenkus killed my father, his own son! As for Kralthorix… you heard from my mother some of the horrors he was responsible for. I can’t let them get away with their atrocious behavior any longer!”

Lily just nodded as she continued to hold Haley in her arms. She then told her beloved, “That’s the Haley that I know. You never let anything stop you before. Even being sent to prison did not ruin your optimism!”

Haley nodded back at Lily and then the two women released each other slowly. Haley did her best to dry the tears from her eyes and told Lily, “Thank you, Lily. You really are a good friend for reminding me of my own strengths like that.”

Lily just smiled and nodded. She knew that that was what she was going to get from Haley for the moment. There was no “I love you,” or anything of the sort, coming.

Suddenly, both Lily and Haley heard Elisa’s voice saying, “There you two are. We get to get into position now! The enemy is on the move and we have been given new orders!”

The two Privates turned around to see Corporal Elisa Verite looking over at them with her arms folded. Lily and Haley both saluted Elisa and Lily asked, “What are our new orders, Corporal?”

Elisa simply motioned for Lily and Haley to follow her and told the duo, “After yesterday’s display, we have been ordered to help defend the trenches just to the east of our hilltop command
post. Apparently, the new arrivals from the House Arthus will take over the position we held yesterday. The Syfal will be providing their air support. Haley, your mother has informed Sergeant Adams that she intends to fight alongside us. She has no known superior officer who could challenge her on this matter, so we saw no reason to deny her request. Layla will be with us once again as well.

Haley nodded and replied, “I guess that we will see what sort of skills my mother’s assassin training gave her.”

Elisa nodded as she led the two Privates past dozens, if not hundreds, of Terranoran Army soldiers scrambling to get into position. Lily wondered what sort of plan the DRA would have prepared to try and breach the Woodstock Line today. Who knew what sorts of diabolical magic or beasts the Dalugonian invaders would employ in their drive towards Agharta.

When Lily, Haley and Elisa arrived at their new assigned position, they saw the rest of their detachment along with Kalia Strongwind. Kalia was inspecting a Vargas Technologies Semi-Automatic Rifle, while Layla was trying to position her large reptilian body so that she would have solid cover but also be able to reposition herself rapidly if necessary. Chuck was inspecting his own rifle while Howard and Tala were looking out onto the open plains to the immediate south of the Woodstock Line.

Elisa took up a sniping position, while Chuck noticed Lily and Haley approaching. He told the two privates, “Captain Joland and the rest of Flamehawk Squadron are setting up their positions just to the west of here. Our intelligence units strongly believe that a good portion of the DRA forces are going to make a beeline for the center of our lines today. The enemy is not taking all that long to receive new reinforcements. They are planning to attack again today with whatever units they have ready.”

Up in the sky, Lily could see Terranoran Air Corps airships and airplanes preparing to engage the enemy air fleet. She had a feeling that today’s battle could be the engagement that decided the future course of the war.

Kalia looked over her daughter and her detachment. She admitted, “You all are quite the motley crew, to be sure. Still, I am used to motley crews. I will not let any of you down, especially considering that I was training and fighting since before pretty much any of you were born. It will be good to finally have an army at my back for once.”

Elisa called out, as she sighted down her rifle’s sniper scope, “I can start to make out the approaching enemy! The high-flying units are starting to move towards engaging each other. …I see a lot of white in front of the enemy main force on the ground. What could that be?”

Haley pulled out her binoculars, Kalia pulled a well-worn pair out as well. Everyone else, except for Elisa, squinted to see what they could see of the incoming enemy ground forces. For a few tense moments, the white shapes in front of the DRA hordes became more and more easily visible.

It was actually Layla who called out, “Feral dragons! The DRA is somehow driving feral dragons in front of their infantry force. Their wings look torn into for some reason.”

Haley nodded and then pointed out, “I see some tall winged humanoids wearing lightly-armored DRA uniforms following the feral dragons and carrying long, wicked-looking, metal spears. The regular infantry are following them from behind along with giants, half-tracks and some other dragons.”

Kalia pointed out, “Those humanoids with the wings are called Drakeclaws. They are pretty
common in the mountainous regions of Dalugon. As for the feral dragons themselves, their DRA handlers must have injured their wings on purpose so as to make it harder for them to fly away while in captivity, or once deployed.”

Chuck grimaced and added, “I guess now we see whose lives the DRA values even less than those of their humanoid soldiers. We need to deal with those feral dragons as soon as the opportunity arises! They could freeze and tear our frontlines to shreds if given the chance!”

Lily heard artillery units beginning to fire from behind the lines of both sides. Machine guns and field guns across the Terranoran lines began to open fire on the advancing DRA units as aircraft began to duel in the skies above them.

Heavy artillery fire began to fall across the battlefield, taking out a number of DRA soldiers and vehicles behind the charging feral dragons. One of the larger feral dragons was hobbled by a light cannon shell to the knee, while another died from a shell to the head. However, there were still plenty of the beasts coming right for the Woodstock Line, soaking up machine gun and small arms fire as they advanced.

As Lily saw DRA shells landing around the Terranoran trench lines and in front of them, Elisa shouted, “The enemy should be in range now!”

Chuck called out, “Focus on the feral dragons first and foremost!” He then charged up a flaming meteor and launched it into one of the oncoming white drakes, the creature withstood the hit, but then took heavy fire from Lily’s allies. Two machine guns and a field gun positioned nearby the main body of Flamehawk Squadron opened fire on the enemy mass as it continued to close in.

Lily saw a smaller feral dragon rushing towards her and her allies. As Tala and Layla conjured up force shields, she sent out a mighty sonic scream towards the winged lizard. The younger feral dragon had a massive hole torn in its stomach and collapsed to the ground, dead.

Kalia focused on her hands and then conjured a series of what looked like flaming circular saws. She then tossed three of them into one of the larger feral dragons, allowing Tala, Haley and Elisa to shoot the beast in the throat and stomach, badly wounding it. Howard finished the monster with a powerful, coursing, ray of purple light to the head.

Now, some of the DRA regular infantry were beginning to advance ahead, no longer fully relying on the feral dragons and their Drakeclaw drivers to cover them. Enemy gunfire began to ring out in addition to fire from the Terranoran lines.

Elisa downed a DRA sniper with a headshot and then began to work on reloading her rifle. Not far away, Elena detonated a massive Inferno Burst that took down two unsuspecting feral dragons and three Drakeclaws who had been closing in on her troops. Juliana blasted another feral dragon and a Drakeclaw with a column of purple fire. Any arcanists that the DRA had in the fight were staying in the backlines with the fully sentient dragons for the moment.

In a few areas of the Woodstock Line, a feral dragon or two would reach the trench and begin to breathe in blasts of frigidly cold air. However, these dragons were often felled by heavy machine gun fire and point-blank shots from light artillery before they could do too much damage for the moment.

Layla was chucking spheres of fire at the enemy feral dragons from her claws. Lily had projected her own force shield and was looking for a new target. In the distance, she saw a series of red energy rays tear into and kill two Drakeclaws that had tried to reach the Terranoran lines themselves after losing their feral dragons to heavy gunfire. From what Lily knew, Cerberus II was
mostly based atop the nearby hill. They were protecting General Woodstock’s command post.

Chuck blasted another feral dragon with two successive rays of fire. Lily followed up her sergeant by sending a well-aimed sound wave in which sliced off one of the monster’s claws hands.

As the white-scaled beast cried in pain, it was taken down by gunfire from Kalia and Haley, along with a barrage of force rockets from Tala.

Kalia told Haley and Howard, “We need to save our flame breath for any of them that get right on top of the trenches! The good news is that the enemy is starting to advance more regular infantry and try and keep the feral dragons back. They seem to want to avoid expending them all so quickly now.”

As Lily took aim with her pistol at some of the DRA infantry soldiers who were closing in on her detachment’s position, Howard called out, “Look up, everyone!”

Lily gasped as she saw a trio of forest dragons, each larger than a full-grown elephant, flying towards the top of the nearby hill at full speed. The dragon at the center of the trio was the largest, their two comrades were focused on covering them from any possible attackers. Now, quite a few of the DRA Drakeclaws were taking off and flying with their spears out to join the three forest dragons.

Kalia shouted, “The one at the center is Ralshenkus! He has made a showing in this battle after all.”

Haley replied, “He has to be going for the command post! We have to stop him!”

Chuck shouted back, “Our orders are to defend this spot goddammit!”

Suddenly, before anyone else could say anything, Captain Joland flew up and out of the trench with a three-layered fiery force shield protecting her. She called down, “I am heading to the hilltop! Anyone who can be spared should follow me and hurry!” Elena then sent out a mighty arc of electricity to blast a number of DRA infantry soldiers and a Drakeclaw who had not been airborne before flying up and away.

Kalia shouted, “I think that the orders have changed, Sergeant! I will take Haley and whoever else will come with us and help your Captain!”

Lily told Kalia, “I am with you and Haley!”

Layla added, “I will follow Lily!”

Elisa told Chuck, “I am going with them! You three can hold the line as best as you can with the rest of the platoon! We can’t let them take out our general!”

Chuck simply nodded. He gunned down two advancing DRA infantrymen with his rifle to cover his subordinates as they rushed through the trench towards the hilltop command post at full speed. Tala sent out a cold wave to blast a number of DRA infantry along with injuring a Drakeclaw. Howard used a blast of sound and purple energy to stun the nearest feral dragon for long enough that concentrated allied gunfire could bring it down.

Now, Lily was following Kalia and Haley with Elisa right next to her. She kept her head low as enemy fire shot over the trenches. Layla was flying now and trying to cover the four women from the air.
Soon, Lily saw Captain Joland landing on the hill, the three forest dragons, along with a quartet of Drakeclaws, were almost to the hilltop where General Woodstock was commanding the Terranoran defenses. The sound of gunfire could be heard coming from atop the hill. Cerberus II was likely opening fire on the hostiles closing in on their position.

Lily had an idea as she followed Kalia and Haley out of the trenches and up the hill. She raised a hand above her, clenched her fist and released it. This was a spell that she first seen Captain Joland cast not all that long ago, it should prove quite useful now. As Lily had planned it, she began to move much faster as her body was infused with magical energy. Haley, Kalia and Elisa were also sped up. Layla was out of range of the spell. However, she was still airborne and closing in on where Elena had landed. A few other members of Flamehawk Squadron were rushing up the hill to assist their Captain. It seemed like Juliana had been left to command the platoon’s forces down in the trenches.

As Lily and her allies regrouped with Captain Joland and her troops, Lily’s spell began to wear off. She then saw that the trio of forest dragons were flinging spheres of acid into the machine gun turrets atop the hill to melt them. The Drakeclaws were trying to draw Terranoran fire away from the dragons, with varying degrees of success.

The two smaller forest dragons both landed and breathed out clouds of intense acidic gas that melted through a number of tents, cover positions and gun turrets. This left the top of the hill wide open and exposed most of Cerberus II.

Elena saw that some of her troops had come to help her and called out, “Forward! Protect the command post and repel the enemy!”

A Drakeclaw spotted and then dove at the advancing Flamehawk Squadron members and Kalia. However, he took a hail of gunfire and a diving bite from Layla. He collapsed from the sky, clearly dead.

Now almost to the command post, Lily and her allies could see Ralshenkus landing as they reloaded and readied their weapons. His head was adorned with an impressive golden crown studded with emeralds.

Cerberus II advanced towards Ralshenkus with weapons drawn as his two subordinates landed. One of them stood on each of his sides. Tanya was charging forward along with a blonde human woman in her forties. Her hair was long and her uniform was well armored. A greatsword was at her back. Even Lily knew that that weapon had slain Sapphire Cordwin Coril back in 1890, a few years before her birth.

Sandra drew a heavy revolver and opened fire on Ralshenkus as Emmet, Ruby, Emily and others tried to catch up to her and Tanya. She called out to the massive reptile, “So, you are Ralshenkus?”

The crowned forest dragon simply responded, “Yes, and you are the one who felled the ‘Greatest Traitor.’ However, I have no time for pleasantries at the moment.” Ralshenkus, as bullets impacted his hide, exhaled a mighty and rushing blast of acidic gas, the likes of which Lily had never seen. The attack practically disintegrated Sandra and Tanya, along with four other Terranoran soldiers.

Ruby conjured up a long and tall wall of ice that prevented the attack from reaching her, her older brother, Emily and the other soldiers atop the hill. However, the wall itself was melted by the gas, exposing those it whose lives it had saved.
Emmet Benson suddenly fell to his knees. He screamed, “TANYA!” and seemed too traumatized to even aim or fire his rifle. He had just lost the woman he had been engaged to in the blink of an eye.

Haley and Kalia took aim at the smirking Ralshenkus and unloaded their whole 8-shot clips into the dragon lord. That got the attention of the closest forest dragon, who turned to Elena’s squad.

As the enemy forest dragon began to bare down on Elena and her troops, Emily drew her dual pistols in the distance and gunned down a Drakeclaw who had dived towards Ruby with her spear in hand.

As Kalia and Haley reloaded, Lily tossed a massive sphere of sound into the advancing dragoness. She withstood the strike to her chest and was in turn assaulted by a wave of superheated steam from Elena. Elisa sniped the foe in the throat as the other members of Flamehawk Squadron on the hill gunned down another Drakeclaw that was headed their way.

As the Drakeclaw tumbled out of the sky, the forest dragoness inhaled mightily, preparing to unleash her own caustic breath on Elena’s team. However, Layla flew right up to and unleashed her own flaming breath faster than the enemy could unleash her acidic breath.

The forest dragoness, who had taken significant gunfire on her way to the hilltop, collapsed to the ground from Layla’s burning breath attack.

Elena wasted on time in leading her troops toward Ralshenkus. As she did, a Terranoran noble dragon leapt onto the hill and unleashed his freezing breath towards the other forest dragon, badly wounding him and killing the final Drakeclaw in the area.

As the two dragons dueled nearby, Ruby rallied her troops as Emmet was still stunned and incoherent. She tossed a massive spear of ice into Ralshenkus’s shoulder.

As bullets pelted the supreme commander of the DRA, he projected a two-layered force shield around himself and saw Elena’s squad charging towards him.

Haley screamed at Ralshenkus, “You killed my father!”

Ralshenkus did not respond to Haley, something else seemed to have gotten his attention. He screamed, “NO! They have arrived at the worst possible moment! Damn you Mirana!”

Lily turned around briefly to see something that warmed her heart. Thanks to now being atop the hill, she could see the force coming in to attack the DRA’s eastern flank. A trio of silver and red airships were on their way from the east supported by flights of red and silver painted Bluejay fighters and Stingray bombers. They were on their way to joining the battle for the skies above Salmanca. Below them was a unit of flame and foothill dragons who were diving towards the DRA ground formations and beginning to light them up with their burning breath. Finally, a few hundred humanoid soldiers, including humans, dwarves and mountainfolk were charging in backed by flame giants wielding heavy machine guns, greatswords and other large weapons. There was even a cavalry unit consisting of mountainfolk lancers and snipers riding atop armored wooly mammoths supported by a few red and silver painted half-tracks.

Layla looked to the east and happily exclaimed, “My mother’s forces are finally here!” There were clearly tears welling up in her eyes now.

As the Flame Duchy Army advanced on the DRA formation’s right flank, ready to tear into...
the, relatively unprepared, DRA backline units, waves of artillery shells began to target the DRA big guns and campsites behind their formation. The Flame Duchy’s artillery units must have gotten set up in the distance and were now opening fire.

Elena chuckled, “They must have maintained radio silence until they were in visual range to avoid tipping off the DRA. Pretty clever.”

Elisa got down onto one knee and began sniping at Ralshenkus’s force shield while replying, “They have made a marvelous entrance! Now, let’s deal with their leader!”

Ralshenkus saw that his one remaining comrade in the area was being mauled by the Terranoran noble dragon and fired on by some of Ruby’s troops. He angrily muttered, “To think that this plan would be ruined by some of our own kind. This will not do. This will not stand!” Ralshenkus was so frustrated by the unexpected arrival of Mirana’s forces and the failure of his own armies to break through the Woodstock Line that he was not attacking. His force shield was broken entirely and he began to take some small arms fire.

As Layla, Haley and Kalia charged towards Ralshenkus, the Forest Dragon Lord shouted, “You may have won this battle, but I will not allow Operation Grand Destiny to fail so easily!” He then performed a quick arcane gesture with his claws that summoned a massive cloud of thick acidic gas just in front of and around him.

Lily called out, “He’s making a smokescreen!”

From behind his acidic smokescreen, Ralshenkus fled the scene, flying away at top speed and energizing his own body with a similar light that Lily had used to speed up herself and her allies. The wounded dragon lord reached the DRA lines and landed where he could be covered by his followers at a safe distance from the Terranoran and Flame Duchy armies.

The other forest dragon who had followed his lord into battle was dealt with by the Terranoran dragon that had attacked him. The noble dragon finished his battered and bloodied foe with a bite right to the jugular vein.

Lily looked around as Haley angrily shouted, “DAMN IT! He got away!” She saw that the Flame Duchy’s dragons were focusing on finishing off the few surviving feral dragons and Drakeclaws. Thanks in major part to the arrival of the Flame Duchy’s air units, a number of DRA airships were now falling out of the sky and onto the plains of Salamanca. It also looked like the DRA infantry, dragons and vehicles on the ground were now ceasing their advance on the Woodstock Line.

As Ruby tried to help her older brother up, Elena ordered, “Form up a perimeter! Elisa, get into position and do what you would do best, snipe that is. We need to see what communications equipment can be salvaged here and make sure that all our units in the area are informed that the Flame Duchy Army has come to our aid!”

Lily projected out a new force shield and took up a position with her pistol at the ready while her other comrades formed their perimeter along with their noble dragon ally. Emmet was doing his best to regain some semblance of composure as he was held in his younger sister’s arms.

Emily told Ruby, “At least your quick thinking saved the rest of us, Lieutenant. Still, we lost Tanya… and our commanding general.” She then took out her binoculars and looked out onto the battlefield. Even though she was still fuming, Haley did the same thing.

Kalia put a hand on Haley’s shoulder and told her daughter, “I had a feeling that we would
not slay Ralshenkus today. The good news is that the DRA formations are taking heavy fire from multiple sides. She then took out her own old pair of binoculars and looked out onto what was unfolding on Salamanca’s plains.

Layla landed nearby Lily and Elisa and asked, “Captain Joland, should I go see if Chuck, Howard, and Tala are alright? I think I see my mother roasting the last couple feral dragons left on the battlefield.”

Elena replied, “Please go check in with Juliana and get a report from her. Once this battle is over, you should go see your mother again and try to ensure that her forces are in this fight for good. Hopefully, she won’t be too mad at you.”

Layla nodded and told Elena, “It will have all been worth it if my arrival helped convince her to march her armies down here. I also helped save Lily back nearby Playamar, remember.”

Lily nodded and then pointed out, “The enemy is certainly no longer trying to attack our lines. Most of their airplanes have been shot down, or forced to retreat and their airship fleet is taking heavy losses and beginning to fly south.”

Kalia then smirked and added, “It looks the DRA ground forces are doing their best to make an organized retreat south. They are falling back and taking quite a bit of fire from multiple sides as they do. Layla’s people’s arrival has discouraged them enough that they are trying to conserve what is left of their forces and fall back while they still can.”

Layla flew down to locate Juliana as the Terranoran bombers and fighters flew south to destroy the remaining DRA artillery units. It was doubtful that the DRA would have had time to set up significant anti-aircraft defenses around their camps.

Lily smiled as she saw friendly artillery shells impacting the retreating enemy units and the Terranoran airships and the Syfal flying forward in pursuit of the enemy’s remaining airships. It seemed like the battle for Salamanca had been won. For now, Agharta would be safe from the DRA. However, even though the Woodstock Line had held, the woman it had been named for had been killed, along with her daughter. Lily wondered how the shakeup would affect the Terranoran command structure going forward. The forces arrayed against the DRA would need strong leadership in order to press their advantage.
In the end, the Terranoran Army and their Flame Duchy allies had won the battle of Salmanca. It had been an epic-scale, two-day, clash that had resulted in the beleaguered DRA forces making an arduous retreat back towards Sandgate Fortress. On the way, they had abandoned most of their forward camps, much of the supplies they had kept there and even some of their surviving artillery pieces. The enemy’s dreams of capturing Agharta had been dashed and the Terranorans would soon be going on the offensive.

Despite the loss of General Sandra Woodstock and her daughter, Major Tanya Woodstock, the Terranorans fortified defensive positions and healers had kept their casualties somewhat low. Fortunately for Lily and her comrades, reports had come in to the hilltop command post that Tala, Howard and Chuck had survived the battle. Lieutenant Carlton had successfully led the majority of Flamehawk Squadron in defending their stretch of trench until the enemy had begun their full retreat. Nobody else whom Lily had become well acquainted with had perished in the defense of the Woodstock Line. Liliana DeepTree and her druidic forces had proven their own mettle again by holding a portion of the western lines against the DRA on both days of the battle. The small House Arthus squad commanded by Lilia Heliopolis had also fought well and survived the battle with air support from the Syfal.

As for the Flame Duchy reinforcements, whose arrival had convinced the DRA commanders that it was time to retreat, Layla had reported in to her mother as the enemy was falling back as fast as they could. The Flame Duchess had reportedly been frustrated with her young child. However, it had also come to light that Layla’s disappearance after having stated her intention to fight for Terranor had been a major factor in her mother’s decision to march her army to Salmanca. One piece of good news for the Terranoran Army was that the Flame Duchy’s units had not just come on a rescue mission to find Layla. They intended to stay in the fight until the DRA was forcefully removed from Terranor for good. Mirana had been informed of Kalia Strongwind’s intel about Kralthorix being involved in the upper echelons of the DRA. The Flame Duchess was surprisingly eager to face Kralthorix in combat if it came to it. She wanted to best the younger, sexually deviant, male who claimed rulership over her species by whatever means necessary.

In the three days following the victory at the Woodstock Line, more good news came in for the successful Terranoran defenders. For one, new reinforcements were reported to be heading south to join the main army for upcoming pushes deep into Ruvia to dislodge the enemy units occupying the mountainous peninsula. Also, Terranoran units stationed across the Western Front were starting to advance on the DRA’s positions. They were liberating towns and cities across the region. It sounded like the Terranoran Navy had been making to hard for the DRA to resupply their forces in the west by ship. Now, the DRA units on the Western Front were facing emboldened Terranoran units that were beginning to outnumber them in some places. Finally, it had been reported that James Benson, the father of Emmet and Ruby Benson, had been promoted to the position of Commanding General of the Terranoran Armies and was to replace Sandra Woodstock. His first chief objectives in his new command would be to recapture Sandgate Fortress and then advance into Ruvia. The DRA would have to be pushed out of Terranor first and foremost.

As for Lily’s detachment, Layla had been allowed by her mother to keep fighting. However, she would be fighting by her mother’s side from now on. She had said goodbye to the detachment and expressed hope that she would see them again soon. Kalia had been consoling her daughter over their failure to kill Ralshenkus during the second day of the battle. Haley had also been annoyed that Ralshenkus had not even acknowledged her angry declaration during the battle.
for the Terranoran command post. Howard and Tala had been spending plenty of time together. Howard had learned from Kalia that the main religions in Southern and Central Dalugon were based on ancient draconic deities, some of whom were actually presumed to be dead. A common Dalugonian legend held that two of the most powerful and active of them had slain each other in a battle that had taken place around ten-thousand years ago. Elisa had been hanging out more and more with the foreign mercenary Cyril Forrester. Lily had even seen her trying on War Tiger stealth armor once. Chuck had been either spending time alone, or with Elisa’s little sister Clara. As for Lily herself, she had been practicing her magic and doing her best to convince Haley that the Battle of Salmanca had resulted in a major victory for their side. She repeatedly brought up the DRA’s retreat and the heavy casualties that had been inflicted upon their massed forces.

Now, four days after the battle’s conclusion, Lily was standing with the rest of her detachment in the open air not far to the north of the Woodstock Line. Recently, Terranoran units in the area had been getting reinforced from the north and taking stock of the damage dealt to their fortifications in the last battle. The Flame Duchy’s army had set up a camp to the east of the main line. Both forces seemed to be chomping at the bit to begin the task of driving the DRA from the continent. They would need to act with some degree of haste so that their enemies would find it hard to recover from the losses they sustained at Salmanca. From what Lily and the rest of her platoon knew, the DRA had retreated back to Sandgate Fortress and the camps they had set up around it. Reports were coming in that some members of the enemy force that had assaulted the Woodstock Line were retreating farther south than Sandgate. Those DRA units were likely planning on bolstering their positions in Ruvia with the intent of being prepared when the Terranoran armies arrived to take back that region.

Along with Flamehawk Squadron were all of the Special Actions Platoons that had been under the command of the late Major Tanya Woodstock. Captain Emmet Benson was at the head of the cluster of roughly one-hundred soldiers. From what Lily had heard, James Benson, the man who was now taking Sandra’s Woodstock’s place, had fought for the Second Rebellion after serving in the old Domain’s army against the Eulidian Empire. He had chosen the rebel’s side because most of his old comrades from the Cerberus Battalion had done so. The good news about now General James Benson from what Lily had been told by Howard and Elisa was that he had done his best to focus on reconciliation after the UCG had been removed from power. He had not wanted the conflict between the United Church and the secularist rebels to turn into a war of extermination.

Lily watched from behind some of her comrades as three military vehicles drove into view. Two blue and white painted half-tracks were flanking a six-wheeled military staff car painted with the same colors. The trio of vehicles drove steadily towards the assembled soldiers. It was not long until the pair of half-tracks peeled off and the staff car drove forward and stopped only a few feet from Emmet.

Emmet and the other assembled soldiers gave their salutes and stood at attention as one man and one woman got out of the back seats of the car. They were both wearing fancy-looking blue and white dress uniforms. The man had a longsword sheathed at his belt, while the woman had a rapier. General James Benson was a dark-skinned human man much like his son. However, he was in his forties at least. He walked up to Emmet and embraced him for a few moments. He then embraced his daughter Ruby and then finally, Sergeant Emily Falchum upon getting out of the car. The woman who stepped out of the staff car was a light-skinned blonde around James’s age. A small line of pinkish coloration could be seen going down one small shock of her hair.

Haley whispered to Lily, “That woman with the General… I think she is…”

Hitomi Winslow walked up to the blonde woman and saluted her. However, the new arrival
simply responded by embracing Hitomi warmly and holding her tightly for a few moments before releasing her.

Haley finished, “…Lady Mara Winslow of Bakaria. Some say that she was the initial instigator of the Second Rebellion.”

Lily nodded and quietly replied, “She also slew the UCG High Priestess Kylana… At least Sergeant Adams is not flying into a rage this time, or even clenching his fists.” Lily knew that Chuck had learned of Sandra and Tanya’s deaths and had done his best to show little reaction to them. From what Lily had gathered, her Sergeant had found the idea of serving under General Benson far more palatable than serving under their last General, even though he had also fought for the Second Rebellion.

After Hitomi and Mara released each other and stood next to each other, General Benson addressed the assembled elite soldiers, beginning, “Thank you all for gathering here today and for your bravery and sacrifice so far. I wanted to address the late Major Tanya Woodstock’s command before I address the rest of our forces stationed in this region. First of all, I want to be upfront with all of you about the surprise arrival of the Flame Duchy Army in the recent battle. Truth be told, our high command in Agharta was made aware of Mirana’s advance south into Salmanca well before her army reached the Woodstock Line. We did not distribute that information broadly so as to preserve the element of surprise for our allies. We also wanted the appearance of the Flame Duchy Army to be a rallying cry for our beleaguered troops holding the line. We planned to broadcast the impending arrival of reinforcements if it seemed that the enemy was breaking the line, so as to boost morale. Thankfully, the Flame Duchy’s forces arrived in time to prevent that from being necessary.”

James took a deep, long, breath and added, “In terms of the command held by the late Major Woodstock, who was to become my daughter-in-law. Our high command has decided to give it to Captain Emmet Benson, promoting him to Major. Lieutenant Ruby Benson will be taking his place, receiving a promotion to the rank of Captain. Sergeant Emily Falchum will also be promoted to the rank of Lieutenant to take Ruby’s place in Cerberus II.”

Emmet seemed to have mixed feelings about his recent promotion. Ruby simply sighed, “This is not how I wanted to make Captain…”

Emily seemed happy about having been promoted to an officer’s position. Lily was admittedly happy for the woman who had given her the first shooting lesson she had ever received.

James turned to Mara and smiled at her, he said, “My Lady, would you be so kind as to give your parts of the briefing?”

Mara gave James a playful punch and sighed a bit. Lily was surprised to see the famed stateswoman and soldier acting in such a way. However, the Lady Winslow then stepped forward and cleared her throat. She explained, “As many of you can imagine, since I am here in the first place, Bakaria has finally managed to wrangle enough support to rally the armies of the Northern Mutual Defense Coalition against the DRA. As I speak, a few of our divisions are making a beeline for the northern edge of the Western Front, where they intend to mount a surprise attack against the DRA divisions in that area. Also, more armed and battle-ready northern units are being ferried by train to Agharta where they will be prepared for redeployment south to aid in the liberation of Ruvia.”

Mara took a deep breath. She then smiled and added, “That is not even the biggest news I am here to deliver today. With the help of my husband, Sugaru Zaki Winslow and Terranoran Military Attaché Austus Pelagi, General Takeshi Tanaka of the Republic of Fadalia has convinced the
Fadalian parliament to vote in favor of declaring war on Dalugon. General Tanaka is the head of the Fadalian Army. He recognized the broader existential threat the DRA posed early on in the war. Fadalian warships, airships and transports are currently on their way to the Western Front. Their support will allow the Domain’s units there to outflank the DRA and drive them from that region for good. Another Fadalian fleet is making its way towards the eastern coast of Terranor to provide naval support to Admiral Hooper’s Terranoran Navy. That fleet will also include transports ready to land infantry and vehicles backed by Fadalian dragons wherever they can be most helpful to the Terranoran forces.”

The mood among the Terranoran Elites was now running high. Their home’s historic allies had all come to their aid, even though it had taken some time for them to be rallied to action.

Mara asked James, “Would you like to take over again, General Benson?”

James nodded and then finished, “Lady Winslow will be returning to Agharta for now to join with her incoming reinforcements. We have also confirmed, as many of you know, that the Flame Duchy’s army will be providing their strength to the defeat of the DRA as long as the foreigners have any footholds on Terranor. The Flame Duchess herself plans to lend much of her forces to the upcoming assault on Sandgate Fortress. From there, her forces will most-likely advance into Western Ruvia. The druids of the Central Circle will be staying behind to defend Agharta, as has been their proclaimed mandate from the start. The UCG’s militia units under the command of Eric Ewdrick will receive frontline deployments in the days to come. For now, as I hinted earlier, your units will remain on standby, but be ready to march south towards Sandgate Fortress at a moment’s notice. Sometime after we begin our march south, we may be receiving some special new units from the Vargas Technologies factories in Agharta. However, that is all that I can say on that subject for the time being. You all are dismissed as of now.”

After the proper salutes were given and James went off with his son and daughter to prepare to address the main force, Lily and Haley headed off to inform Kalia of all that they had just heard. They both knew that she would want to keep fighting alongside them as the allied armies marched south. Lily was wondering, as she and Haley headed towards the mass of tents behind the Woodstock Line, where Kalia’s father Kralthorix and younger sister Reira were now after the recent DRA defeat.
Advancing on Sandgate

Two Summer weeks passed as the Terranoran forces stationed at the Woodstock Line packed up whatever artillery and supplies that they could and began a massed movement south towards the DRA-controlled Sandgate Fortress. The Flame Duchy Army was marching not far from the main Terranoran Army force. The small House Arthus unit was still with them, the *Syfal* flying alongside the other allied airships.

Dozens upon dozens of military trucks and half-tracks transported war material and soldiers south across the plains of Salmanca. There were hundreds of infantry soldiers of a wide variety of species marching along with them. Airships and aircraft were also moved up. It had not taken them long to reach the destroyed and abandoned DRA camps and loot them for what supplies and usable ammunition they could scavenge.

Eventually, the Terranoran armies had set up an expansive camp codenamed “Castlebreaker” within a day’s march of Sandgate Fortress. They wanted to make sure that their new base was just out of range of the artillery positioned atop the fortress walls. Reports had come in from the Western Front that the DRA was being actively pushed back, thanks in part to the NMDC divisions that had recently arrived to join the fray. Orders had come in from Agharta that the assault on Sandgate Fortress was only to begin in earnest once the “special reinforcements” that General Benson had described earlier arrived. Apparently, those new units would be the Terranoran ground forces’ best chance of reaching and penetrating the fortress’s walls without being torn to bits by enemy machine guns, artillery and dragons.

It was early evening two days after the Castlebreaker Camp had been fully set up. The Terranoran armies were awaiting the arrival of the new reinforcements. The good news was that they were apparently on their way from the vicinity of the Woodstock Line now and should arrive at the camp within a few days. The new unit employing the new reinforcements was codenamed “Wolf Squadron” and that was all that Lily and her allies knew for sure about it for the moment. A report had also come in indicating that Vargas Technologies was working on developing a heavier type of bomber airplane, which would hopefully be delivered to the Southern Front in time to see action.

Lily and Haley had been asked to come to a special briefing that Captain Ruby Benson was holding at the southern edge of Castlebreaker Camp. Apparently, Haley’s mother, Kalia Strongwind, had been invited to the briefing as well.

As Lily walked alongside Haley towards the Southern edge of camp, she wondered how long it would be until the war was over now that Terranor’s historical allies had come to her defense. Fadalian forces were reportedly beginning to land troops on the Western Front and engage the DRN in that vicinity. Speaking of naval battles, the Domain of Terranor’s navy had been successfully pushing the DRN back on both sides of the Ruvian coast since the conclusion of the Battle of Salmanca. The tide of the war had turned. Now, the question remained of when it would end and what would it take to end it?

Haley and Lily reached a small crowd of soldiers, where they met up with Kalia. Also present were Tala, Elisa, Emily, Alicia, Cyril and a few others. Pretty much everyone there was either a recon soldier or an arcanist of some kind. Captain Ruby Benson was standing at the front of the crowd. There were a pair of black-painted military trucks right behind her.

Soon after Lily and Haley had arrived, Ruby addressed the crowd by saying, “We now believe that Wolf Squadron will arrive within four days. Upon their arrival, we intend to make a dawn attack on Sandgate Fortress with support from our Air Corps and the Flame Duchy’s forces.
One of our biggest concerns regarding the upcoming battle is that the DRA may have positioned some artillery units closer to our camp. That would allow them to fire on Castlebreaker directly, or at least get in a heavier rain of artillery on our ground forces as they advance on the fortress. We know that the enemy has set up a series of camps to the northeast and northwest of Sandgate. However, they are not our concern for now as they are not far enough from the fortress to hit our position more easily."

Ruby took a breath and explained, “I have asked you all here this evening because Major Benson has requested that I put together two scouting parties together and lead one of them. Using war tiger stealth armor to blend in with the night, we will advance on the fortress in these trucks. We will be dropped off with one guard at each truck and then advance on foot separately until we are in sight of the enemy camps. Each guard left behind will need to know how to drive. Once we have done our best to confirm the presence, or lack thereof, of enemy artillery north of the main DRA camps, we will fall back to the trucks. Each scouting party should have five members. However, I would like one member of each party to be a capable sniper who will hold back and cover their allies from a distance in case of combat. Everyone going on this mission will be bringing their normal equipment with them. If either team ends up engaging the enemy, it will be their job to fall back as quickly as possible. We are not going to risk trying to destroy any artillery positions we find. That will be a job for our air units and ground assault teams. Any questions?”

Seeing as though the mission objectives had been made clear, there were no immediate questions. However, Lily told Haley, “I don’t think I will be the best person to go on this mission. You know how much sound most of my spells make. Also, I do not know how to drive.”

Haley nodded and patted Lily on the shoulder. She replied, “Understandable, Lil. I intend to go, however.”

By now, Ruby had seen a few hands go up and was doing her best to put the two teams together. Kalia had raised her own hand. From what Lily had been told, Haley’s mother had received extensive infiltrator training and limited arcane instruction during her brief time serving her father, Kralthorix. Haley raised her hand last, since she had been talking with Lily.

Ruby looked over everyone and decided, “Lieutenant Falchum, I want you to lead, Corporals Alicia Forrester and Elisa Verite along with the two Strongwinds. I will take Private Guissel, Corporal Cyril Forrester and two other members of Cerberus II. Elisa will act as your team’s sniper. Cyril will be our team’s sniper. We should easily be able to line up drivers for the trucks within the next hour.”

Everyone present saluted Ruby and then the two selected teams of five got ready to get suited up and roll out.

Haley told Lily, “With any luck, I will see you tomorrow morning. At least this time we don’t have to infiltrate an enemy camp and blow up some of their artillery. We are just checking to see what the enemy may or may not have set up.”

Lily nodded and suggested, “They could have figured that out via aerial scouting, but I guess that aircraft might have been easier to the enemy to spot. Also, it would be quite hard for them to view the ground accurately at night if they tried to reconnoiter the area from the sky then.”

Haley told Lily, “I should be heading out now. I’ll see you, Lil.”

Lily simply nodded, still wishing that she could go with her beloved in some way. However, she decided to return to her tent and get some rest for the night. She was pretty sure that Haley and the others would be fine. They had pulled off a spectacular success last time, after all.
Haley Strongwind had ridden with her mother, Emily, Alicia and Elisa in the back of the black truck for what felt like a few hours. It was night now. Thankfully, that would make it even harder for the enemy to spot them. Fortunately, Kalia and her mother had built-in night vision as half-dragonesses, as did Tala on the other team. Elisa also had decent night vision on account of both her sniper training and her mother’s deep elf blood.

Upon reaching a place where the trucks could be concealed in some small groves of trees, Ruby had led her team southwest and Emily had led her team southeast. After another hour of walking, Haley was beside her mother just behind Emily and Alicia. Elisa had been left not far behind to scan the area with her scope and cover the team in case they were detected and combat broke out. Everyone was wearing black war tiger stealth armor. Based on her own observations and what Lily had told her earlier, Haley was pretty sure that the Emily and Alicia were at least casual lovers.

Haley was doing to her best to look for possible concealed DRA artillery batteries when her mother asked her, “Haley, I hate to bring this up now, but there is something I want to ask you about that girl Lily. The one who shared a cell with during your brief incarceration, that is.”

Haley looked over and asked Kalia, “Sure, what about her?”

Kalia asked, “I have noticed the way that Lily looks at you, even if she tries to hide it. She seems to have trouble taking her eyes off of you whenever the two of you are together outside of combat. It reminds me of how your father used to look at me.”

Haley was in all probability blushing at the moment as she walked beside her mother south down the plains. She stammered back, “Truth, be told, mom, she is in love with me. She told me herself a while ago, before we were deployed to Salamanca. Before you ask, I do not reciprocate her feelings for me….At least… I don’t think I have the same feelings for her that she has for me.”

Kalia shrugged and replied, “I want you to be happy, Haley. I don’t want you to suffer as I have. That was why I left you at that orphanage. You are a good person and it would be very hard for me to be more proud of you than I am now. What I am saying is that I trust you to follow your heart on this matter.”

Haley nodded awkwardly back over at her mother. She knew how much the half-elven ex-convict cared for her. That much was obvious and had been for a while. Haley knew that she ultimately cared for Lily. However, she still doubted that those feelings amounted to romantic love for the girl she had befriended in prison.

Suddenly, Haley was shocked back into reality by Emily calling out, “I can hear something above us….”

Kalia looked up and squinted. She then told the rest of the four woman team, “That has to be a low-flying DRA airship! It must be on patrol, or returning to Sandgate.”

Suddenly, a trio of searchlights lit up from underneath the DRA zeppelin. The lights began to scan the ground, sweeping in a number of directions. One of them was aimed a good distance to the north of the four scouts. However, the other two were scanning the ground not far away from them.

Alicia pointed out, “They are not scanning in the vicinity of Captain Benson’s team from
what I can tell. Still, we need a place to hide and fast.”

Emily squinted a bit and said, “I see something not far up ahead. It could be a place to hide…”

Kalia told Emily, “What choice do we have?”

Emily nodded and then she led the four woman closer to the objects in the distance. When they were almost to their destination, Haley realized something that made her quite nervous. She called out, “That looks like a series of camo nets…”

At that point, one of the airship’s searchlights lit up the four women, dazzling them for a moment. However, the light was not followed by machine gun or cannon fire.

Haley looked around for a moment, disoriented. Her blood then ran cold as she heard a woman’s voice she had heard before calling out from behind the camo nets, “After all these years, this… this is how I finally catch you Kalia. By chance while waiting behind some camouflage. Honestly, I will take it.”

Haley saw her Aunt Reira, heavy revolver in hand, advancing out from the camo net. She was followed by ten other humanoid DRA troops wearing dark gray and black armor.

Kalia defeatedly asked her sister, as the DRA soldiers all took aim at the four scouts, “How long did you see us coming for, Ri?”

Reira smirked and replied, “Well, Kales, we detected you long enough ago that I was able to send Corporal Syval and two others to secure your sniper. The patrolling airship was radioed as soon as I realized what was going on. Now, the four of you, hand over all of your weapons. Then, get on your knees, lower your heads and put your hands on them. One false move and we will open fire on the offender.”

Haley realized that Reira had not mentioned Ruby’s team. It was entirely possible that they were still undetected. Hopefully, they would get back to Castlebreaker Camp safely.

Emily complied first, sighing deeply. She was the team leader and now, she had gotten her whole group captured. However, she had to know that they had very little chance of defeating their foes, especially with the DRA airship’s spotlight still on them and its weapons almost certainly trained on them.

Haley and then Kalia also complied with Reira’s orders. Soon, all four women were on their knees and looking down at the ground with their hands on their heads. It did not take long for thick black leather muzzles to be applied to Kalia and Haley’s heads and locked with padlocks. Their captors did not want them breathing fire to be sure. Haley and Kalia’s muzzles were clearly designed for those of flame dragon descent as they had appropriately-placed nose holes to allow for breathing.

Emily and Alicia were both gagged with thick pieces of black cloth. Then, all four women had their wrists locked behind their backs in light manacles with very little chain in between the cuffs one by one. Reira was taking no chances as the four prisoners were all also shackled and chained to each other by metal neck collars. Emily went first, then Alicia, then, Haley, then Kalia.

The prisoners and their escorts had to wait for a few minutes until the half-flame dragon Corporal Andrea Syval arrived leading a cuffed, shackled and gagged Elisa Verite right in front of her. Two heavily-armored DRA soldiers were flanking her. One of them had a radio at his back and
the other was carrying Elisa’s confiscated weapons.

Elisa was chained to Kalia via one more metal collar. Then, the five captives were led away to the south. The five prisoners were marched until they reached a series of three DRA trucks. The captives were loaded into the back of one, along with Reira and Andrea to keep watch.

As the cuffed and muzzled Haley was driven away, she was certainly worried. However, she was more worried for her mother. She had a good feeling that she, Elisa, Emily and Alicia would likely not be killed by their captors, since they were all prisoners of war. They could be useful in a prisoner exchange. or for information, if they could be induced to give it. However, Kalia Strongwind was viewed as a wanted traitor to the Flame Dragon Lands. Reira, her own little sister, had been trying to capture her for decades. Haley just hoped that a rescue would come soon as the trucks neared Sandgate Fortress. She knew that she could not stand to lose her mother so soon after having met her.
The next morning at Flamehawk Squadrons’ section of Castlebreaker Camp:

Lily had fallen asleep in her tent well before any of the scouting parties were scheduled to return to camp. As soon as the half-elven woman woke up in her tent and rubbed her eyes a bit, she heard the voice of Tala Guissel saying, “Lily! You are up!”

Lily shot up and burst out of her tent in her casual clothes. She saw a casually dressed Tala in front of her. The deep elf girl looked worried. Lily asked Tala, “Are we under attack?”

Tala shook her head no and explained, “We are not. However, I have some bad news for you.”

Lily looked and felt confused as she asked her friend, “You got back safely. What could have gone wrong?”

Tala sighed and told Lily, “Captain Benson’s team returned safely, that is true. However, we have every reason to believe that the other team was intercepted and captured by the enemy. … At least we found no evidence of forward DRA artillery positions…”

Lily leapt forward and put her hands on Tala’s shoulders, she asked, “Does that mean that Haley got captured?”

Tala sighed and nodded yes. She told Lily, “We saw them get caught in an enemy trap involving a DRA airship. Captain Benson decided that we should retreat to avoid detection and capture after that. She felt terrible leaving Lieutenant Falchum in the enemy’s clutches.”

Tears were now starting to streak down Lily’s face. She exclaimed, “Tala, who knows what those bastards are doing to Haley… and Elisa and Emily and… this is not good at all. Do you know when we will assault the fortress and have a shot at rescuing them?”

Tala told Lily, “Probably not immediately. … We should go and talk to our Captain. Chuck already knows what happened, as does Howard. Cyril Forrester is concerned about both his sister and his lover being in enemy hands. Clara is obviously worried about her big sister as well. I am scared for them all, Lily. You are not alone in being worried.”

Lily sighed as Tala began to lead her over to Captain Joland’s command tent. She suddenly realized something and replied, “Kalia is going to be in the most danger out of all of them. Her father’s servants and even her own sister have been trying to capture her for years. She may be as good as dead now. I hope that if that happens, Haley is spared. If Haley died… I can’t even imagine what I would do.”

Tala and Lily were almost to the command tent now. Howard Torrance was waiting for them. He embraced Tala, his friend and lover and then told Lily, “I assume that you are quite worried about Private Strongwind… Haley that is.”

Lily nodded, tears still in her eyes. She asked Howard, “Can I go in there and talk to Captain Joland?”

Howard responded, “I will not try to stop you. Our Captain and Lieutenant are in there right
Sergeant Adams is doing his best to console Clara Verite at the moment."

Lily saluted Howard and then ducked inside of the tent. She saw Elena and Juliana in their full uniforms looking over some maps. Lily did not care what was on the maps at the moment.

When Elena Joland looked up and saw Lily, her response was a simple question, “You’re worried about Haley, aren’t you?”

Lily nodded as she saluted Elena and Juliana. Elena then continued, “Juliana and I do not keep secrets from each other. I know that you love Haley Strongwind. You should know that I am worried about all of the prisoners the enemy took last night.”

Lily asked, “Are we going to assault the fortress soon then?”

Elena sighed, walked over to Lily and put a hand on her shoulder. She then told the half-elf Private, “I will tell you this much, General Benson has promised that Wolf Squadron will be here and ready for combat tomorrow afternoon or evening. The day after tomorrow, we will be making an all-out dawn attack on Sandgate. However, until then, there is nothing we can do for the prisoners that I hope are still being held there.”

Lily was on the verge of full-blown sobs. However, she did her best to regain her composure. She knew the sort of woman that her commanding officer was. The Flamehawk of Austean was not the sort of person to leave any of her comrades to a cruel fate. Lily was pretty sure that her Captain would look into other options to rescue the captives if there were any available at the moment.

Lily told Elena, “Thank you ma’am. I know that not every Private is likely privy to that information at this stage. Just let me know whenever we are to move out and I will be right there as always.”

Elena nodded and then Juliana told Lily, “We will do everything we can, Lily. I remember how panicked I was when my big sister had been captured. You love Haley and we all know how much danger her mother must be in. You are dismissed for now.”

Lily exchanged salutes with her Captain and Lieutenant. She then left the tent to meet with Howard and Tala again. Lily knew that she had to see the woman she loved again. Even if Haley never reciprocated her affections, she would do whatever she could to rescue her and the other captives.

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The dungeon below Sandgate Fortress sometime in the early afternoon the same day:

Haley and Kalia were sitting next to each other on a bench in a small prison cell below the central compound of the DRA-occupied Sandgate Fortress. The DRA were taking no chances with their black-clad prisoners. Their wrists were manacled together in front of their backs, their legs were shackled and they were wearing suppressor collars.

The other three prisoners, Emily, Alicia and Elisa had been deposited in a cell closer to the northern walls of the fortress down the dungeon hall a ways. All of the prisoners got occasional, scheduled, bathroom breaks, but were kept in their cells and chains for the most part.

As mother and daughter had been sitting together for hours after sleeping lightly and fitfully, Kalia had told Haley that Reira probably still did not know that she was related to Haley. What concerned Haley more was that they had learned that Kalia’s monstrous father Kralthorix
was currently in command of Sandgate. Haley did not know where Ralshenkus had gone off to since the Battle of Salmanca.

Haley had expressed repeated worry to her mother that she would be put to death for her “treason” to her rapist of a father and his realm. Kalia was mostly worried about being taken away from her daughter if that happened. She had admitted to Haley that she almost relished the chance to confront her father again after all of these years. Also, she had what Haley considered to be a vain hope that she could somehow convince Reira that supporting their father was wrong.

Sometime not long after the two prisoners had been fed a light lunch, Haley saw a lone Lieutenant Reira Strongwind in her full DRA uniform walk up to the bars of the cell and fold her arms. The half-dragoness shook her head and sighed quite deeply. She then asked Kalia, “Now that we finally have you in custody, I have a question for you. Why did you do it, Kales? Why did you betray us and your draconic blood?”

Haley found it almost amusing that her mother had a nickname so similar to her own. Kalia looked up at her little sister and replied, “Do you really need to ask me that, Ri? I had honestly hoped that you would defect soon after I did. If you truly have to know, I did not want to serve our father because I did not want to be the tool of the one who caused our mother so much suffering.”

Reira sighed again and told Kalia, “Our father always loved you, he always doted on you and gave you everything you wanted. I only received a fraction of the attention you got from him. I was always so jealous of you, but you were still my big sister and I looked up to you. Then, you up and left us!”

Kalia reminded Reira as Haley looked on, “You looked up to me because I was always looking out for you! You were my little sister and I knew I needed to protect and care for you. I don’t understand why you didn’t come with me. My feelings of guilt and self-hatred nearly drove me to take my own life! That was why I left our father’s service. I wanted to be better than my birth and stop the suffering caused by the callous dragon rulers who view non-dragons as pawns.”

Reira balled up her clawed hands into fists. She then looked over and told Haley, “I remember you now, the girl I kicked in the stomach back at Salmanca. You fought well, kid. I apologize that you have gotten wrapped up in our family squabble…”

Haley interjected, “I am a part of the squabble, actually. My name is Haley Strongwind. It was after our fight when I first learned about my own heritage.”

Kalia took Haley’s bound hand in one of hers’ and told Reira, “She is your niece, Reira. I don’t know how much you care, but all I can ask you right now is that even if I am done away with, that you do what you can to make sure that my daughter is spared.”

Reira looked taken aback and then stammered, “Your union with Scallarix really did bear fruit. How did I not know about this before?”

Kalia replied, “I left her at an orphanage in Scralville as a baby. She found her way to Terranor as a young woman, ran afoul of the law while trying to help some folks and then was conscripted into the local military.”

Reira sighed again and then seemed to remember something. She clenched her fists and told Kalia and Haley, “Before I report in to father to see what is to be done with you, there is something you need to know, Kalia. …I snuck into our mother’s execution and watched from the shadows. Before one of father’s vassals immolated Emma Strongwind with his fiery breath, her final words expressed motherly pride in you. She never said much about me, but she praised you
with her last words. She had been told why she was being executed and her response was that she was glad that you had become what she considered to be a good person.”

Kalía was clearly feeling a roiling mix of emotions. Haley was not at all sure what to say to her mother or her aunt. Finally, Kalía told her sister, “Reira, I am sorry about how you feel. I can tell that you stayed by Kralthorix’s side to serve him in the hopes of gaining his praise. Still, know that I never wanted to be your enemy. I love you, whether or not you feel the same way.”

Reira sighed one more time and then told the two prisoners, “I should go and report in now. I will do what I can to ensure Haley’s safety. However, it will ultimately fall to father to decide what is to be done with you, Kalía. You are undeniably a traitor, unlike your daughter. The other prisoners will be interrogated, but we have no reason to dispose of them.”

With that, Reira turned and walked away. Haley was grateful that her aunt cared enough to try and protect her. She was still extremely concerned for her mother’s life and Reira’s visit had not done anything to allay her concerns.

Once Reira was gone, Kalía sighed and said, “So, my mother was proud of me after all. … Haley, I may not say this to anyone else, but I will kill my father if I get the chance. I hate to thrust anything so serious onto you, but if I perish, I want you to see my mission through and ensure that Kralthorix dies.”

Haley told her mother, tears in her eyes “Of course. I hate being this helpless, I don’t want you to die, mom! Still, I will do whatever I can to help avenge my grandmother and my father. I love you, mom… I can’t stand to think of you going so soon…”

Kalía told Haley, “I don’t want to leave you either. Still, I won’t prostrate myself before Kralthorix and ask for his forgiveness or even mercy. I just cannot do that. My conscience will not permit it.”

Haley laughed awkwardly and told her mother, “We are really mother and daughter, aren’t we. That sounds almost like something that I would say.”

It was less than an hour until Kalía and Haley saw Reira return to their cell door with her Corporal, Andrea Syval, and two other DRA soldiers. Reira and Andrea entered the cell and Kalía and Haley were instructed not to resist. Both of them had their wrists rebound behind their backs. They were also both muzzled again. Once the two prisoners were fully secure, they were led out of their cell and south through the dungeon. Reira was right behind Kalía and Haley the whole time. Andrea and the other two guards peeled off once Reira led the two prisoners out of the dungeon and up to the surface.

Once the pair of prisoners were led out of the dungeon and towards the southern courtyard of Sandgate Fortress, Haley heard a man’s voice calling out, “Hello, Reira. It has been too long since we last met.”

Haley saw a half-desert dragon man wearing a tan and brown outfit that looked sort of like a professional arcanist’s field robes. He was walking closer to the trio and looking inquisitively at Kalía and Haley.

Reira called back, “Hello again, Loktar. I was wondering when I would run into you again. Did Andrea have a chance to tell you about last night’s success?”

Loktar, as Reira had called him, smiled a toothy smile and responded, “Yes, I take it that one of these ladies in black is Kalía Strongwind, your older sister?”
Reira replied, “Yes, the taller one is her. The younger one is her daughter…as luck would have it. My niece…”

Loktar simply nodded and then told Reira, a more serious tone in his voice, “Between you and me, I don’t like the DRA’s chances of victory at this stage. Reira, I just want you to know that if you ever truly need help, then me and my patron Sianna will be there for you. I know that your family situation cannot be pleasant for you.”

The muzzled Kalia and Haley exchanged confused glances. Haley wondered if this man was her aunt’s lover, or at least a close friend of hers.

Reira replied, “Thank you for your concern, Mr. Sulieman. However, I have my duty to do for now. I need to deliver these prisoners to my father. I will be seeing you.”

Loktar simply nodded and gave Reira a gentlemanly bow. He then headed off, allowing the three half-dragon women to pass.

Haley now realized that she and her mother were being taken to her grandfather. They were being taken to Kralthorix, the Lord of the Flame Dragons.

When the trio arrived close to the southern edge of Sandgate’s walls, they saw a single man approaching them. He looked no older than someone in his late thirties and was wearing a red and white robe that looked reasonably casual in its design. His hair was orange, similar to Cyril Forrester’s. Kalia’s eyes narrowed as she got closer to him.

The man held out a hand and then said, “Reira, be a good girl and remove your sister’s muzzle. I have been waiting to speak with her for some time.”

Reira did as she was told and unlocked Kalia’s muzzle. Kalia stared daggers into the man, who then told her, “Kalia, you must remember Scralville. I remember how much you always loved that visiting that seaside town. In fact, you apparently even sent my granddaughter there to keep her away from me. It worked, I will give you that.”

Kalia angrily asked her father, “Your point is?”

The man chuckled and then fell to his knees with his body coursing with energy. Kralthorix grew to the a size larger than a mastodon and assumed his true red-scaled, winged, reptilian form. Now, his ruby-studded crown was visible atop his head. The Lord of the Flame Dragons looked his daughter in the eyes and told her, “That town you love so much is in our possession now. I would have made you the Lady of Scralville in a heartbeat if you had stayed by my side. You and Scallarix could have gotten married and had many more children, if you so pleased. You were always so bright, talented and charming, Kalia. I never forgot to remind you of your strengths. How, how could you have hated yourself? You betrayed me and Reira and you paid the price by losing the man you loved and having to live in squalor for two decades without your child. What do you have to say for yourself?”

At that moment, the terrible and twisted truth dawned on Haley. In some insane way, her grandfather had loved her mother. Somehow, despite the monstrously cruel way he had treated Emma Strongwind, he had loved the first spawn of their unholy union. Haley began to feel even more sorry for her aunt as well. Had Reira truly stood by her father to try and gain his approval after Kalia’s defection?

Kalia glared back up at her father and told him, “I would try to explain it all to you, how much pain my very existence caused me until Scallarix convinced me that it was not my fault. Still,
you could not understand it at all. I don’t claim to know why, but your mind has been twisted by privileges that nobody should have! The way you treated my mother and the evil you support in the form of Ralshenkus… you could never see how I suffered, even as you tried to play the part of a doting father. Now, I know that my mother loved me in the end….”

Kralthorix responded, “Some fools think that being a half-dragon is a curse. No, it is a glorious blessing for a humanoid, giant, or other creature to have the blood of Austean’s first sentients flowing in their very veins! You could not simply accept your gift… yet you passed it on to your own offspring.”

Kalía shouted back, “At least I was loved by Scallarix for who I was! You wanted me to slay those who would stand in the way of Ralshenkus’s world domination scheme. I was not going to become the Captain of the Red Claws. I know that Scallarix had similar intentions placed on him by his father, but he also refused. Know that whatever you do to me, you will not get away with aiding the Forest Lord’s mad plan!”

Kralthorix chuckled and then told Kalía, “Luckily for you, I am not Ralshenkus. I brought you into this world, but I won’t allow you to be taken out of it so easily. Reira has told me that my granddaughter should be spared. I agree with her on that matter. You will be punished for your treason, Kalía. However, I have not yet determined the form your punishment will take. Reira, take them away, back to their cell. Then, report back to me here.”

As Reira re-muzzled Kalía, Haley felt immense relief. As evil as he clearly was, Kralthorix could not bring himself to put his own daughter to death. Kalía had smartly not revealed that she intended to visit that grizzly fate upon her father if given the opportunity.

Kalía and Haley were led back to their cell by Reira who joked dryly about how “well” the “family reunion” had gone. Haley was sure that she had heard some conflict in her aunt’s voice. However, she was unable to discern where it was coming from.

Once Kalía and Haley were deposited back in their cell, Reira left them without another word. Now, all that mother and daughter could do was wait and hope for a rescue.

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