

## The Spoils of War

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A grin cuts across my painted face, exposing my sharp canines to the chilling winds that soak into my bones through my heavy fur cloak. I press closer to Kalil's scaled neck to absorb his heat, grasping his sharp horns with my gloved hands.

Once we reach the Porta Caeli Valley, the only pathway through the impassable mountains, I see the Sigrarian army, which is armed with large shields, spears, swords, and what appeared to be metallic armour covering their chests and heads. The aerial scouts report the army is approximately twenty thousand men strong. I smirk at the Sigrarian king's arrogance. Any fool who knew my people would realise strength in numbers wouldn't defeat us.

Kalil sweeps towards the Sigrarians, and I let out a war cry, seeing our Pardus tearing into their ranks, claws and fangs bringing destruction. The bodies of our enemy's bleed into our soil. I urge Kalil on, wanting my share of the carnage. He snorts fire and arrows towards a herd of Loxodonta, their wickedly curved tusks reflecting the glow of the elemental egni wielded by our Egni Natur. The Sigrarian are in disarray, their warriors scrambling for retreat, but we've got them in a pincer movement. There will be no escape.

Releasing Kalil's horns, I construct my egni glaive in a rush of warmth. I let out two sharp whistles to signal the eight members of my flock to split off and circle the battlefield looking for weak points or stragglers.

No enemy of mine will leave the battlefield this day.

I scan the army and a group of soldiers on horseback catch my eye, I focus on the figure in the middle seated on a large black warhorse. I can see him yelling orders to the warriors that surround him, several of them rushing to other sections of the army. He pulls another warrior out of the way of one of my flock's arrows. I narrow my eyes before dismissing him; he can be dealt with later.

Shouting a war cry, we dive towards the Sigrarian warriors, who have aligned their shields. Kalil thuds into the shields, causing the men to buckle at the knees. Kalil lets out an ear-piercing screech, and the men scream in terror and confusion. They have never encountered an Aves.

Kalil tears at the shields with his talons, throwing them aside, taking warriors with them. The warriors remaining attack Kalil with their spears, but they slide off. I squeeze my

knees and Kalil digs his talons into the shields before taking off into the air. In my peripheral vision, I see members of my flock completing the same attack. Diving again, we glide above the vulnerable soldiers. I lash out with my glaive, cutting into throats and chests. Panic spreads among them like a wildfire as their defences are torn apart.

Before long, I see the commander shouting to the soldiers as they begin to be organised into familiar arrow formation and move towards the Egni Natur. I let out a low whistle that rises at the end, directing Kalil and my flock to land in front of the shield. The soldiers rush towards us, terror in their faces as they shriek war cries.

‘Fire,’ I shout, straining my voice to be heard above the din of battle.

Kalil and my aves open their mouths. Blue fire spills out between their teeth before firing the flames towards the charging soldiers. Their remaining shields melt as several men catch fire. The scent of burnt flesh wafts over the battlefield.

Giving another short whistle, I take off into the air. I glance about the battlefield to find the commander. He is on horseback directing the soldiers back into ordered ranks. His armour shines in the light.

‘There he is. Time to end this,’ I mutter.

We swoop above the heads of the warriors towards the general. Spears fly towards me, and I direct Kalil into several complicated twists and turns to avoid them. The soldiers surrounding the commander close rank with their swords held towards us.

As we near them, I give Kalil a sharp command.

‘Catch.’

The warriors let out shouts of surprise as Kalil barrels over them. They attempt to stab Kalil but are swept aside. I use my glaive to cut the throats of five of the warriors before Kalil pushes into the air. I glance down towards Kalil’s forefeet and see the general grasped in his talons; I hear him spitting curses.

‘Kalil, present.’

Kalil raises his front legs level with his head revealing the general. As he struggles, Kalil’s talons dig through his metallic armour. Up close, I can see the general is a young, too young. His armour and remaining weapons are good quality, and he has golden hair and skin. He’s most likely a son of one of the nobles whose first military campaign is to conquer Paradisus. I swing my glaive around to rest under his chin where there is no protection, and he falls silent. I switch to the common tongue of the outside world. ‘Surrender.’

His eyes widen. ‘You speak common tongue?’

‘Yes, surrender.’

‘I can’t.’ His voice is defeated as he glances between the battlefield and me.

‘Surrender, or you and your men will die.’ My voice is sharp as I press my glaive deeper into his neck.

‘You’ll kill everyone?’

I give a sharp nod. We can’t allow any information to be spread about us. If the general commands his army to surrender, we can keep the survivors from leaving Paradisus and reporting to their king.

His lips thin to a pale line. ‘What will you do with us if I surrender?’

‘You’ll take an Egni oath. It binds someone to their words and will affect anyone even if they don’t have egni. You can live with us, but you’ll never leave.’

He furrows his eyebrows. ‘Egni? What?’ he mutters before shaking his head. ‘What about their families?’

It’s my turn to furrow my brow. ‘We can collect them; they’ll take oath as well.’

The general glances towards the battle. I hold my breath, hoping.

‘Okay, we’ll surrender.’

I let out a relieved sigh. I didn’t want to have to kill them all. Removing my glaive from his neck, I direct Kalil into a smoother dive. Once we near the ground, Kalil comes to a stop, releasing the general.

He looks up at me. ‘We never introduced ourselves. My name is Armani Gaumond.’

A smirk curves my lips. ‘Saoirse Batair, and this Kalil.’

Armani gives a weak smile in response before turning towards the soldiers who have raced towards us, swords and spears pointed at me. Armani holds up his hand before shouting loud enough to be heard over the warrior’s cries.

‘Stand down men, stand down.’

The soldiers slow, but their weapons are not lowered. They move into a protective circle before coming to a stop, Armani at the centre of it. I must suppress laughter at their attempts to guard Armani, I could kill them with one word.

‘Sir?’ One of them asks Armani but their eyes never leave me.

‘We’re surrendering. Inform the rest of the army,’ Armani says, which prompts several of the warriors to gasp before turning to look at Armani.

‘What about the king, sir?’

Armani mounts one of the warrior’s horses before replying. ‘No need to worry about him. We won’t be returning to Sigrar to feel his wrath.’

He turns to me. ‘Right, Saoirse?’

I bare my teeth in a wide grin, as my ears flick forward. ‘No, you are a part of my people now. Welcome.’