

Jaquie León
Leonj@plu.edu

Twain

by
J.N. León

Every ether-suit is unique in that their pilot leaves an undeniable imprint within the metal. Each scuff, patch, dent, and stain is an echo of their actions, blurring the line between soldier and suit with every mark. Helena has always thought the ether-suits things of beautiful tragedy. They're wondrous machines capable of enabling great feats of heroism, but equally vivid destruction. Whole cities fall under their weaponry. Countless lives snuffed out with a single command. A necessary price, they say. Kill or be killed, slay or be slain. What is the weight of a few witches when held against the very futures of your kin? Against the lives and livelihood of Etheria?

She takes a deep breath to steady herself, and Charger breathes with her. Its cold hull consumes her, burning hot with the expectations of her soldiers. Her unit had been amused at first when she'd insisted on naming her mech, but had eventually come around when she quoted, "They're an extension of us. That deserves a name, doesn't it?" Named ether-suits are commonplace now, and the occasional holdout usually gives in after the first incident of their mech being a bit too much of an extension.

"How much further to our next rest point? My feet are gonna fall off!" Helena's lips quirk in amusement at the voice crackling over the communications channel. Before she can reply, one of her officers speaks up.

"Did you forget how to walk that fast?"

"No," comes the sulky response. "But I bet if I'd had a bit more time to sleep..."

"Sleep? We're the best the empire's got. Our penance is no sleep, and marching 'til our feet grind to dust."

Even the officers can't find the heart to stop the unit's laughter. Helena's smile fades. Her laughter sticks in her teeth, caught behind the decorum of rank. She lets the laughter continue for a few more seconds before her voice immediately silences their well-earned jabs.

"We'll break for camp soon. Until then, be sure you keep a few of your toes from dusting."

"Yes, Commander!" The uniform response is tinted with mirth. It brings a small smile back to Helena's face.

⋈+⋈+⋈+⋈+⋈

"Are you alright, sister?" Noe's curious voice draws her attention, and Helena quickly plasters on a reassuring smile.

“Of course.” Her measured reply seems only to concern him more, though he doesn’t speak it. After a suspicious “hmm”, Noe ultimately settles on not pressing the matter, and returns to peering out the window with enthusiastic interest. Perhaps it was because he’s the baby of the family that Noe remained the only “innocent” Haelix. One by one, war or no, all had fallen to cynicism at some point. Not him, though. His trademark, Haelix-blue eyes still sparkle with the delight of youth, even though his shoulders have but recently filled with the broadness of adulthood. A small, selfish part of Helena wished she could keep him buried away in their holds. She could shelter that childish innocence there, keep him from seeing beyond the cracks in the story. Alas, it was ultimately not her decision to make, and now that he’d officially reached adulthood, his wish to see the capital was not one she could deny.

His smile returns to his face with a chuckle. “Everyone looks so posh here,” he laughs. “I don’t think I’ve seen so many feathers in my life.” Helena chuckles softly in return, briefly flashing back to images of Noe chasing hens about the yard. “That’s the fashion these days,” she replies calmly. Noe just shakes his head in befuddled amusement.

“Odd choice, but I respect their confidence to wear birds instead of eat them.” The warmth of mirth settles between the two siblings, and a comfortable silence washes over them. For a moment, Helena’s tension eases as the purpose of their visit fades from her focus. “What do you say to a night at the theater, sister? I hear *Cry of Calinde* is showing at the Celderae.” She mulls the suggestion over, swaying smoothly with the carriage as the etherite crystal turns right down another street.

“If you wish to see the production, I will go with you.”

Noe’s expression twists in disapproval. “I don’t want you to go on my behalf.”

“You’d rather I go for my own interest?”

“Obviously.”

Helena barely manages to stifle her chuckle at the childish pout on her little brother’s lips. Instead, she shakes her head and smiles fondly. “I find that particular play a bit...unsatisfactory in certain areas. However, I’d like to go with you if it would bring you happiness.”

“Your joy brings me happiness, sister,” Noe retorts with a sigh.

“As does yours,” Helena chuckles. “It’s no burden to share in what you enjoy. Quite the contrary, it’s my pleasure.”

Noe still looks suspicious, as - perhaps - all siblings do, but ultimately he smiles and relents just in time for the carriage to stop at their first destination. “Then I’ll meet you for the evening show?” Helena nods with a smile watching as her brother straightens his coat and opens the door. For her trouble, she’s rewarded with a beaming smile that rivals the sunrise.

“Enjoy your day on the town, brother,” she says in her smooth, but tender way. He flashes that bright grin once more and nods, letting the door close quickly behind him. Helena sits back with a sigh, and the carriage flashes with a blue glow as the panel lights up beside her. She almost doesn’t need to look at what she types, and in seconds the carriage is lurching forward once more, driving itself to the new coordinates.

⋈+⋈+⋈+⋈+⋈

From touch to taste, every inch of Etherian mechs are designed to resonate with their pilot. Utilizing bio-mechanics and the neurological concepts within cybernetic limb replacements, engineers had crafted machines that enhanced combat beyond any imaginable barrier. Though many found the pistons and straps awkward initially, Helena had never had that issue. There was an adjustment period to how much power she needed to put into each movement, but the way she synced her movements to the gestures of her machine had been like breathing. Even on the day of battle, climbing into Charger’s hull feels like coming home.

Her feet slip easily into the stand, and her arms stretch out without conscious thought to grasp the gloves that fall from the ceiling. Within seconds, she’s securely encased in the wires and powered cables that connect her mind to her machine. Wires are a torrent of power that crackles down, down, down into the crystal within. A shiver runs through her body, and the weight of the world falls away as once more she becomes a shell of steel with an etherite heart. The yawning sensation of channeling its energy is a ghost welcoming her home, and it brings an endless question back to her mind.

While her unit marches to the interception point and prepares for their enemy’s arrival, Helena can’t help turning that question over and over in her mind. Should it really feel so natural to be machine? Did Markus and their father feel the same when they’d fought? Perhaps it's the anticipation of the coming battle, but the lack of answer feels heavier than usual today. Scorn comes with that weight.

Honor. Etheria was ever so enamored with her. Enamored with her claim to justice, to enlightenment, to civility. To have honor was to have pride, but what honor can truly be written in blood? Etheria was proud of Helena, of her honor. Helena could always ask Noe if he was proud of her, and he would answer.

All she would ever get from their father and brother would be silence. Was there honor in that? Was there as much pride in the title the Solenite soldiers gave her as Etheria found in “Golden Knight”? Did Solen find as much honor in the falcon of Haelix as it did in Artorius’ verdant sigil? How much blood must a soldier shed before their enemy deems it honorable?

“Commander!” Helena’s attention snaps to the cry. “Witches! Dead ahead!” True to the warning, Solenite machines swarm across the horizon towards her regiment. That fell silence cuts through the memories, and her gaze fixes on one mech in particular. Burnished silver with an elegant helm carved from sharp, clean lines. On its chest is the emerald gleam of an owl with feathers tufted like horns. Helena’s eyes narrow, burning icy blue with anticipation. Her veins thrum with energy, and her mech whirs to life.

“Artorius,” she whispers. Her fingers tap the code on her thigh, and the safety locks disengage. Drawing her blade from its sheathe, she takes a step forward and points towards the incoming enemy lines. “Knights of Etheria! Rise! Show them what it means to fight!” The comms blaze with a roar of agreement and they move as one. Heavy steps thunder across the plains, making the ground quake and the dirt rumble as the two forces fly towards one another. Dust rises around them. Swirling.

The crash is deafening. Screeching metal. Whining gears. The endless screaming of etherite pushed to the limit. Colors flash before their helms as magic glints against the Etheria’s weapons. There’s no more keeping track of positions. No more time for thought. It’s swing block, duck, stab. A Solenite mech goes down with a cry of metal, and blood follows the arc of her blade, splattering Helena’s armor with red and blue.

The rapid fire of memories is locked behind instinct and experience. Helena bites her lip. Blood trickles down her skin. Focus. No memories. No memories. *No memories.* Her sword screams through iron. Another goes down. Then another. Then another. Kick, slice, jab, crush, *kill*. Her cockpit’s vision is tinted purple with the blood of Solenite soldiers and machines. She’s drenched in it, head to toe. A blur of terror within a sea of death. Even amidst this band - this battalion said to be Solen’s finest - the enemy begins to hesitate.

Helena’s path begins to clear. The wise scatter, while the foolhardy attack and meet their haughty end. She is the devil amidst witches, and they fear her bloodstained falcon. That’s where they finally meet. In the circle of a tattered field, surrounded by their struggling comrades, the Blue Witch of Solen finally comes face to face with the Crimson Scourge of Etheria.

The breath of stillness stretches for an eternity until it’s shattered by the dying scream of Helena’s comrade. She lunges. Her blade meets shimmering blue,

clashing against the magical shield Artorius conjures in a blink. Helena weaves around his swing, narrowly dodging his magical blast. He ducks her retaliation. Sparks fly. Blows come faster and faster, turning the dust around them into a storm that drives their forces further from their epicenter. Neither can find an edge. When Helena's overwhelming strength threatens to crush him, Artorius leaps away like he's flying. As Artorius strikes with unpredictable magic, Helena dodges it with alarming speed. The ground beneath them shakes. Their comrades' cries fill the air, painting the skies in blood.

Artorius' magic blasts a crater under Helena's feet as she barely escapes. Her leap brings her sword crashing down against his shield once more, and finally she drives him to the ground. Metal screeches. Stone creaks. The sounds of battle grow more desperate as Helena's fist cracks the ground a hair from Artorius' helm. For a moment, their eyes lock as her metal hand draws back to aim a second blow. Her fingers creak.

The earth gives way under them. Both machines plunge into the darkness. In the midst of their fall, they lose their grip on one another. The ether-crystal within her mech screams as Helena tries to engage emergency measures, but a fragile ledge thwarts her efforts. Her only comfort is that for every stone she's bouncing off, Artorius is crashing against just as many. Pain shoots through her arm, through her hip, through her head, but still she falls. They fall. They're falling endlessly until they stop bouncing and hear only silence.

That silence shatters as hard stone finally stops their descent. Dazed, but alive, Helena immediately struggles to stand. She barely registers Charger's protesting whine, and manages to stabilize herself with the clang of her left hand against the tunnel wall. Then, the looming features of bared claws and jagged helm appear in the darkness.

Her sword collides with Artorius' barrier before she even registers her own swing. Training takes over once more, and while her mind is still buzzing with their near-endless fall, she begins driving him back further and further. A flash of blue lights up the tunnel, glinting off the walls and surrounding the two mechs with a kaleidoscope of colors. Helena and Artorius clash again and again. Two commanders on equal footing, locked in combat as their machines bounce off the walls in endless showers of sparks and screeching metal. Dazed minds clear, and the war of magic and mortal becomes their sole focus once more. Here and now, one of them will meet their end.

Then the walls scream. The ground shakes, throwing the pilots apart as the tunnel groans and rumbles. It grows louder and louder until the sound becomes an all-consuming roar. Helena staggers, drawing herself up once more with a hand against the shimmering wall. Despite all her training, for an instant, her attention

falters. Her gaze darts to the stones under her machine's cold fingertips and she finds the wall *glowing*. Artorius' attention whips around away from Helena just as the white wall rounds the corner. Helena's eyes widen, her breath catches with recognition.

Blue fills her vision. The glowing, screaming liquid collides with Artorius' magical barrier as both his sword and shield vanish, leaving his vulnerable back exposed. His mech braces against the stone underfoot, fighting against the weight of the incoming current as his barrier flickers and holds. Helena's reality returns amidst awed horror.

"Liquid etherite..." she hears herself whisper.

"And it will kill us both if we don't move fast!" Distorted through his mech's filters, Artorius' voice fills the tunnel. The Solenite warrior groans as his magic flickers once more, and he's pushed back a step. A few drops of that glowing, shimmering liquid escape past the break in the barrier and sizzle against the floor. Artorius faces away from her. Vulnerable. Helpless. Her fingers hover over her thigh. Noe's smile flickers through her mind.

Honor.

Honor writ in blood. Her hand curls into a fist as her breath strangles. Artorius' knee buckles under the strain of liquid etherite surging against his barrier.

"Do something, damn you!"

Reality returns in a gasp. With a scream, Helena throws the first punch. Metal sparks off of stone once more, and Artorius chances a glance over his shoulder as she begins pounding the wall and floor with all her might. Her knuckles ache. Charger's fists groan. Artorius' magic fights to remain stable. At last, the wall cracks. Triumph surges through her, and Helena focuses on the weak point, punching it again and again until the floor under them creaks.

If it weren't for their fear, the way that both commanders glance at one another would have been comical. The familiar crackle is accompanied by the horrifying sensation of - once again - finding themselves both in free fall. Artorius' barrier shatters, and the liquid etherite surges forward.

Helena's swear is loud enough to echo around her entire cockpit as the glowing, volatile mass follows them in their fall. Air whips by them, screeching over her armor like nails. She doesn't even have time to process awe when the tunnel walls give way to a massive cavern. Not when a remarkably flat floor is rapidly getting closer. Her system begins to blare warnings and red lights flash in her cockpit.

Thrusters damaged. Impact imminent.

That volatile, searing waterfall cascades from above. Fangs above, firm jaw below. The flashing lights burn red as death closes its jaw. Helena's mind races. Her gaze snaps to Artorius once more. Twin stars plummeting from hell, sinking into the depths below. Poetic justice. A fitting grave for the knight and the witch.

Helena's eyes burn. Her jaw clenches with a defiant sneer and her arm snaps out. She snatches Artorius' mech and yanks him towards her. "Your turn to do something!" She manages to get the shout out just as Artorius' clawed fingers dig into the golden falcon on her chest plate. Without waiting for his response, Helena locks her arms around his machine, holding them both securely together as her stabilizers fire to try and slow their descent. Artorius pauses. He doesn't speak. Instead, a shimmering blue barrier simply forms around them both.

Seconds pass. The uneven, strangely orderly floor of the cavern races up to meet them. Death chases them down from above. Their fall slows as much as it safely can, and their spin stabilizes in the nick of time. An instant later, they crash through an ancient roof only to be met with a shimmering, purple glow. Helena barely has time to register the magic before they're falling through it and slamming into the solid floor below.

They crash through the barrier with twin screams and echoing shatters. Artorius' barrier breaks through the stones, then shatters against the purple aura. He lands on his side with a brutal crunch. Helena hits the ground legs first. Charger's metal crumbles like paper, and sparks surge up the mechanics affixed to her left leg. As the cockpit hits stone, the warning lights blare a final shriek and she's forcefully ejected from her mech.

Helena's world spins as she flips through the air and bounces off pristine floors. Pain burns through her bones like lightning and she tastes blood. Her vision is filled with the sight of liquid etherite pooling over purple magic as white cracks through her skull and turns the world black.

⋈+⋈+⋈+⋈+⋈

"Is that Commander Haelix?"

"The Golden Knight? Wasn't her unit handling the witch uprising on the outskirts?"

Helena sinks back against the cold stone wall of the theater. It's solid and steady despite the centuries. Even with tapestry, paint, and etherite-powered lighting, it still feels unchanged. Real. She closes her eyes, willing her mind to remain quiet as the murmurings disturb distant memories of earth and blood.

“I heard they returned but a week ago. My cousin says they crushed the rebellion before it could even lift its head.”

“Of course they did! They’re led by our Golden Knight.”

“Honestly, the very thought those heretics would try to stand against us is beyond me. They’re our lands, after all. As if we’d let them reclaim them after we fought for so long to get them back.”

Murmurs of agreement flit about the group, and Helena senses the increase in eyes on her. None approach her outright, though. Hero of the people. Friend to none. She exhales slowly, lifting her head and opening her eyes to meet those many glances. Not an ounce of fragility shows in her stoic features, but she does manage a smile and a salute for her ogling public. The theater lobby lights up with gasps of delight, and that simple act of civility brings the walls between them crumbling down.

In an instant, she’s surrounded by the upper-class. Wealthy hands, political smiles, and slimy praise piles up to her nose. The air drains from her lungs. She holds steady, unmoving as a soft hand claps her shoulder as if the noble had known her his whole life. She sneers. It comes out as a poised smile. They praise her. No prisoners, they say. Good. Let the heretics rot. Let Etherian fields be fertilized by Solenite blood. Let the guts of fallen warriors feed the crows. Shame about her comrades, though. Pity about the lost. Their poor mothers, fathers, families. Those poor Etherian families, ripped apart by the bloodthirsty Solenite witches. Good thing you killed them all.

“Indeed it is.” The red sea parts, and Chancellor Vraex smiles up at Helena’s calm gaze. She stands straighter, pulling herself to attention as her fist meets her chest and lower back.

“Chancellor,” she greets with a simple bow. He’s still smiling when she stands fully upright once more. Senators flank him, mirroring his smile before squawking their own so-called praises.

“Commander Haelix, you honor your house and our empire. Congratulations on your safe return, and our condolences for your lost comrades.”

“It is my honor to serve. I am Etheria's humble servant.” Helena’s sharp tongue stays its desired words, and she speaks with the decorum expected of a noble house. The crowd around her swoons. “I will pass along your sentiments to my soldiers’ families. Thank you.” Pleased as can be, the politicians flash smiles to all. Someone is praising her again. Praising the blood-red of her hands just to hear their voices playing at ethics.

They let her go without protest when she makes a flimsy excuse to slip

away. As she lets the shadows of ancient halls blanket her in obscurity, the crowd behind continues their celebration without her. Their air seems brighter under artificial ether-light.

⋈+⋈+⋈+⋈+⋈

The air is sterile and stagnant when she comes to, and Helena immediately regrets her entire existence. Someone left stones in her lungs, and claws in her bones. Her head aches like a thousand drums, but she can only hear tense, subtle breathing. The only familiar comfort is the cloying scent of blood. It embraces her, cradling her throbbing skull, holding her twisted hand, and even caressing her screaming leg. She wants to vomit. She wants to sink into it. Those distant breaths won't let her.

Groaning softly, her eyes struggle open and blink away the blurred daze before her. Even half-focused, the image makes no sense. She's laying on what appears to be a chiseled, stone floor that would be in perfect condition if it weren't for the scattered pieces of machinery. Pale, iridescent light dances across the floor, but when she tries to look towards the source, her vision blacks out once more. Dazed, she just closes her eyes and sits still for a time.

When her eyes open again, they follow the path of broken armor and weaponry. Half of it is painfully recognizable. Scattered pieces of her ether-suit litter the area, but within the mess is an equal amount of elegant silver now smashed and crumbled. Eventually, the trail leads her to the mess in the far corner. Her wheezing breath catches on aching ribs.

Artorius' machine is a wreck half-gone. Arm missing, one crushed leg, and shattered pieces thrown here and there. The hull is half torn open, and just below the cockpit sits the infamous witch. His legs are in a tangle, haphazardly askew as if he can't bother finding them a proper place to rest. He's leaned back against the owl emblem on what remains of his cockpit, with his right arm dangling limply before his chest. Midnight strands have fallen from where it was tied back, and if it weren't for the way his head was tilted, they likely would have hidden his eyes from view. Instead, Helena finds her glance met with the calm, overwhelming power of Artorius' emerald gaze.

Silence stretches between the two warriors, broken only by the respective, ragged breathing of each combatant. Occasionally, one would find their consciousness fading, but it would always return in the end. No matter how much time passes, neither move towards the other. Not that they could if they wanted to. Instead, they both remain quietly in their corners, pressed against the shattered remnants of their famed armor.

Gradually, Helena's mind clears enough for her to process more of her

surroundings. She recognizes that the solid weight against her back is the remains of Charger's hull. The odd, red smears across Artorius' face and uniform are not demonic markings, and are actually blood. This she realizes at approximately the same time she discovers the alarming amount of her own blood pooled on the ground around her. Fortunately, while looking up still seems to pose a bit of a problem, she's able to slowly maneuver herself to sitting via careful shuffling and plenty of fainting. If he notices, Artorius is mercifully silent about her objectively pathetic display.

As Helena finally manages to prop herself into an upright position, she glances down at her leg. The sight should probably be enough to make anyone scream or faint. Likely both. Instead, Helena just huffs and cracks a smile. Manic, creaking laughter suddenly pours out of her. She sinks back against her mech, giving in to the waves of mirth.

Through her cackling, she catches sight of Artorius staring at her as if *she's* the mad heretic. The absurdity of it all hits her full force once more, and if she weren't so precariously balanced, she likely would have doubled over as her laughter overwhelms her. It's a few seconds later that she hears a nearly-stifled snort from across the room. When she looks back at him, Artorius is tense. His shoulders shake with suppressed chuckles that are rapidly breaking free. Helena snickers with absolute glee.

"Fuck, I think I'm in shock."

Her comment shatters Artorius' resolve, and the two commanders collapse into mad laughter. The air is noticeably warmer, and heavier, when their snickers finally fade some time later. She smiles wistfully into the distance, watching memories play before her eyes.

"I think bones are meant to stay inside the body," she laments mirthfully without sparing the offending limb a glance. "Damn, to think it'd be gravity that finally took us out." Artorius doesn't reply, and Helena lets her eyes drift over towards him again. He's watching her quietly, though there's a distant air to his features as if he's actually looking through her.

"You know, if you hadn't ordered me around earlier, I might think you were mute."

"You did the same." The grin Helena forms is nothing short of a smirk when Artorius finally replies. This time, when they look at one another, there's a sense of begrudging understanding.

"Then we're even."

"Mnh," he hums simply in reply.

The room spins, and Helena lets her eyes close again. For a moment, the image of her family dances through her mind. Guilt tugs at her heart, but even the thought of her little brother makes her smile faintly. Noe would be so angry with her. He'd probably think she was crazy. Dying by pit. Absurd.

"What's so amusing?" Artorius question sounds equal parts indignant and delighted, but she doesn't bother opening her eyes to confirm his expression.

"I was just thinking how we're both going to miss supper."

The quiet stretches long enough that Helena's eyes finally reopen once more. To her surprise, Artorius has his good arm pressed over the pocket of his uniform, almost as if to clutch his heart. He stares at the ground for a time, and when he eventually looks back up, it's to stare upwards towards the source of that infernal flickering.

"Do you have anyone waiting for you?" She's taken aback by the softness in his voice. The longing. Her armor wavers and she exhales slowly. To give the enemy information is to give them power. It would be to put Noe's life on the line. Her focus drifts from Artorius, instead fixing on the patterns that shift across the floor endlessly.

"Does it matter now?" Helena's weary, measured response pulls a deeper frown across Artorius' face.

"For me," he says quietly, "it always will." Despite her exhaustion, the hint of disappointment in his voice still manages to surprise her. Helena arches her brow ever so slightly and eyes him curiously. Their quiet standoff is eventually broken when Artorius digs into his uniform and pulls out a small, protective case. "If you fight, then you must fight for something. Otherwise, war is just meaningless death for the whims of our so-called betters."

Something in the way his expression changes draws Helena's attention back to him. There's honesty in his words, and as he gazes at the contents of his protective case, his eyes flood with love and sorrow. Surprise still manages to find its way into her words, despite her best efforts, and Helena meets his musings with her own.

"They say witches are heartless. Incapable of empathy."

Artorius glances up at her.

"What do you think?"

His question draws Helena into deep contemplation. Even her eyes fall closed in thought, or, perhaps, it's the throbbing in her skull. What could she think? The legions of Solen flood across the land, descending upon cities with

silence that leaves only death. As far back as their history records, Etheria's knights clash with them again and again, then move on to Solen's cities in return. Machines that shake the earth meet the hunters of the night in endless slaughter. Back and forth, forth and back, until no one can recall who drew first blood or why. Witch and knight collide, and paint the earth in crimson rain.

The world swims before her as Helena opens her eyes to fix them on Artorius once more. This time, the long silence feels heavier. Thicker. Stifling as humidity settling in your lungs, choking off your breath with one inhale at a time. Helena looks down at her leg, musing silently at the blood soaking into her clothes.

“Are your hands as red as mine?”

Artorius presses his lips together and sighs softly. “If they're not,” he says slowly, “then it's only because so much has landed in my mind.”

A thinning pause. Despite hot blood pooling around her thigh, Helena can't help half smiling at him. The two lock eyes. Acknowledging. Understanding. Accepting. Helena can hear the distant rain of death above their heads, just out of her sight. Despite it all, she fishes around until she finds a strip in her uniform that gives to her grasp. The tear of fabric is loud enough to be a rip through the veil of the world. Still, she continues. As Artorius watches, she carefully begins maneuvering the strip of cloth around her thigh. She loops it carefully then wraps both ends firmly around a short, metal pipe that had once been part of her door. Her hand settles over the pipe and the knot, bracing.

“In Etheria, it's dishonorable to harm a warrior who can't fight back.” From the corner of her eyes, Helena sees a mix of amusement, curiosity, and grim admiration on Artorius' face.

“It's the same in Solen,” he swears.

“Good.” Helena takes a deep breath and twists.

⋈+⋈+⋈+⋈+⋈

Sending her eldest sibling and their father off always leaves her hollow. Helena watches quietly as their father gives Noe a crushing embrace to contrast the gentle hug their mother bestows on Markus. They all wear their best smiles, confidently bidding farewells as if this is a simple business trip. It's a skill Helena has yet to master, along with the rest of high-society's desired refinery.

She likes to think that's the only reason Markus sees right through her the moment their mother pulls away, but that would be a lie. In that brief glimpse, their armor falls for only the barest instant. Gone is the poised perfection of

Haelix's eldest children. Instead, there is only a weary, battle-worn young warrior and his silently grieving sister. It's Markus who bridges the gap. In two quick strides, he pulls his little sister into an embrace nearly as strong as their father's. Helena returns it, only for Markus to wheeze in protest.

"Dammit, Hel. Are you trying to break my ribs now?" The tension shatters, and Helena breaks out into laughter. With a playful shove, she pushes Markus off her and swats his shoulder.

"It's not my fault you're still fragile as a daisy," she quips. Markus scoffs at her.

"I am not fragile. You're freakishly strong."

"You say that like it's a bad thing."

"How do you expect to pilot an ether-suit if you keep snapping everything you touch?"

Helena looks smugly up at Markus, though only slightly. There had to be less than an inch's difference between them now. "I'd simply snap all the Solenites in half with my bare hands. Bet that'd earn me Golden Knight status really quick."

That playful grin on Markus' face fades, yanking the ground out from under Helena. His words never get the chance to stabilize her with understanding as their mother calls to them and they're pulled over to the group once more. While Markus is accosted by Noe, Helena is drawn in to her father's embrace.

"Look after your mother and brother for us." Her hands tangle in his cloak, and she hugs him tight.

"I will, father." He's smiling at her fondly when he steps back. His firm, calloused hand ruffles her flaxen locks, and for a moment she's seven years old again. It makes her long for those simple days. For the hours chasing chickens as her father watches proudly, failing to blame stolen pies on baby Noe when the siblings were caught, or even huddling in her mother's arms while the doctor tended Markus' arm she'd accidentally broken. Even that would be better than the grin her brother plasters on as he stands shoulder to shoulder with their father. As if to make up for it, Markus punches her shoulder lightly.

"I'll give you that duel when we get back, alright?" Helena's expression brightens. A bit of warmth fills her heart, and she clings to it tightly.

"I'll hold you to that."

Helena comes to with a groan and immediately wishes she'd pass out once more. Much to her chagrin, her burning leg will not let her rest, and she forces her eyes open to glare at it incredulously. Fortunately for Artorius, she's too preoccupied - and immobilized - to retaliate against him for the amused snicker that escapes. At least grumbling under her breath is a welcome distraction while she finishes wrapping her most pressing wound. The makeshift tourniquet holds, and she quickly uses the remaining cloth to keep the bone stable where it's sticking up like an accursed aid signal.

Gasping for breath, she slumps wearily back against Charger's hull. This time, she finds her eyes can tilt up. She'd known what she'd see, but that doesn't make the sight any less breathtaking. A seemingly endless waterfall of liquid etherite pours down, shattering against the violet barrier now making up the ceiling. At least it makes for a beautiful coffin.

"How long do you think it will hold?" Her musing guides Artorius' gaze up to the ceiling, and he spends a moment considering it.

"Longer than we have left." He gestures limply towards the ceiling behind her head. "A crystal powers it." The hope that blooms in Helena's heart must be visible because Artorius shakes his head before she even says a word. Reality is crushing, but Helena eventually breaks the weighty silence.

"I'd always wondered," she mutters. "Why didn't you just crush us all? If your magic is so all-powerful, why not just wipe us from the planet?" Artorius observes her closely in response, considering her question without answering. Helena simply continues.

"Do Etherians have fangs and claws in your tales?"

Artorius snorts and coughs in a rather undignified manner.

"Huge, crushing feet and empty skulls, actually."

"How flattering," Helena quips, chuckling at the mental image. Artorius smiles in return. Under the ever-raining etherite, the atmosphere between the two warms slowly once more. Walls of ice begin to melt.

"My brother," Helena says softly. The words fall from her tongue before she realizes it, and Artorius looks back at her intently. She can see the moment of realization in his eyes, followed quickly by empathy. Still, she clarifies herself, if only for the closure. "My little brother is waiting for me."

Carefully, Artorius turns the metal case in his hand and Helena takes in the image with suffering. The trio in the portrait are smiling. Laughing. Artorius has his arm wrapped around a beautiful, tall woman, holding her close while she

leans against his shoulder. On his other arm is a child that beams, forever captured in the midst of stuffing Artorius' hair full of leaves. Helena's heart melts with conflict, and Artorius takes his turn to clarify.

"My wife and our daughter." He turns the picture back to himself with a fond smile. "She's just turned seven," he chuckles. "She's already had a party, but we still plan to celebrate when I return."

Their smiles fade at the same time, and both turn their attention to the far walls. In the quiet, Helena's world swims with unshed tears that she refuses to let fall.

⌘+⌘+⌘+⌘+⌘

Verge was what her father called his mech. When Helena had wrinkled her nose in confusion, he'd just smiled and ruffled her hair.

"*My ether-suit is a part of me, Helena,*" he had chuckled gently. "*Why shouldn't I name it?*" If only she'd understood the sentiment then. Those words are what she hears on repeat, echoing 'round and 'round her mind as they haul Verge's wreckage into the hanger.

Injuries too extensive, they say. Nothing to be done. As if they hadn't been the ones who ordered them to battle. As if their worlds didn't keep spinning untouched, enriched by the spoils of conquered soil stained with Haelix blood.

Markus' crumbled ether-suit is shoved into storage alongside their father's.

Such a terrible shame.

Only Noe cries that day. Big, tearful wails of a child calling to a father that will never answer them again. Anya swoops down, embracing her child while pretending not to ignore the useless sentiments of hand-wringing politicians. Somewhere in the recesses of her mind, behind the endless echoes of her father's voice, Helena recognizes that her mother isn't crying either.

After the funeral she remains behind to watch the flames long after the rest have left. Empty pyres raging behind crossed swords and shields, etched with the Haelix standard. Medals are draped around them, and they're adorned with silk sashes in Etheria's crimson and gold. Eventually, the pyres burn to embers and ash, leaving only moonlight glinting off Helena's hollow heart.

⌘+⌘+⌘+⌘+⌘

"I do hate you," Helena says bluntly as the silence clears. Perhaps it's

the lack of malice in her tone that makes Artorius look up. “Our loved ones rot in your fields. Countless soldiers, civilians, and landscapes destroyed...” So much death. Helena’s mind races through the past, colliding with the echoes of steel and screams. Her unit was up there right now. Dying. Struggling. Clawing for survival while their commander sat laughing with the enemy. With the heretic witch who corrupts the soul of the world itself.

“But...” Artorius is quiet as Helena’s words fail her. Pain shoots through her ribs and she takes a deep breath before continuing. “...I hate myself in equal measure.” The two lock eyes once more, awash in understanding as shared experiences dance between them.

Shame there’s nothing to be done.

A shame these wars started so long ago that history has forgotten. Such a shame that no one can recall which stone really belongs to whom. What a terrible, terrible shame that soldiers march into battle on the whims of ivory towers for the sake of draping silk with silk, and spoiling names in fame.

What a shame to perish in endless war with no gain.

Artorius’ head tilts back to rest against his mech, and his eyes fall half-closed with his steady exhale.

“Do you dream of war, red scourge? Do you dream of sunsets painted in blood, and wastelands soiled with endless bones?” Helena’s gaze his steady as Artorius meets it, and the ache in her soul grows deeper with his every word. “I do,” he mutters. Weariness beyond fathom clings to his being. “Every time I close my eyes I see another face. Another body. But I *still* march when called. I meet you head on because if I do not, then the next body may be mine. It may be my child’s.”

Helena’s breath catches, and from the way Artorius’ expression darkens. The image of Noe’s bloodied, vacant body sprawled in a field strikes her hard. With it comes the thought of Artorius’ daughter laying crumpled at his side. Crushed under heel like dust to be brushed away. Bile floods her throat, and she dares not look down at her hands, fearing she might catch sight of the red that forever stains them.

Her eyes are drawn skyward and Helena absorbs his musings while taking in the flow above. Even though the room is cast in a brilliant glow, the world still feels dimmer. Too many words fill her mind, but none of them seem right. What sentence could she possibly string together that would carry a fraction of her intent? What words could truly do justice to a mind scarred with endless faces drowned in the blood spilled by her own hands? In the midst of this

ancient, impossible place, somehow it's her own heart that has left her speechless. In the end, she chooses to let it be.

⋈+⋈+⋈+⋈+⋈

Their mother passes suddenly, struck down by illness while Helena is still on her first tour. This time, Noe is silent as he stands at his sister's side. It's unnatural the way he remains so poised while they burn her body on the pyre. Helena occupies herself considering how having flesh to mourn doesn't make this loss any less painful. When the sentiments come, Helena is the one who accepts them. She is the one who nods endlessly, who remains tear-less and poised.

That night, Helena finds Noe in their mother's study. He's slumped in her chair, scribbling at half-finished paperwork. Wordlessly, Helena pushes the door aside and slips over to her brother's side. Her hand settles on his trembling shoulder.

"Sister..." Noe's voice wavers. He looks up at her with glassy, red-rimmed eyes. The tremble reaches his lip as he valiantly chokes, "She...forgot to initial this."

Neither of them sleep that night. The following morning, the staff silently leave the siblings to their piles and piles of unfinished, messy papers that they sort as if it will bring their mother back. Helena doesn't cry until a month later when she's finally back in Charger's hull looking over a bloodstained field of bodies.

⋈+⋈+⋈+⋈+⋈

Helena sighs shakily. No matter how many times she tries to swallow the lump in her throat, the image of Noe fighting back tears before yet another pyre will not leave. Across the room, she sees Artorius' head bowed, gaze focused intently on the portrait in his hand. This time the silence is too heavy to shatter. Grief twists into frustration, frustration into anger, and anger into fueling rage. Gritting her teeth, Helena clenches her jaw and moves.

Tears roll down her cheeks, but she doesn't fight them. She follows them. Lets them fuel her as her arm braces against the shattered remains of Charger's hull and pulls her slowly to her feet. Her broken leg trembles, and she slumps into the twisted metal of her mech with a snarl. Artorius' gaze is intense as she breaks the tranquil agony suffocating them slowly. Helena can feel it. Sense it. The way the emerald intensity follows her like an endless question. *Why? Why? Why? Why?*

Why?

Why?!

A defiant clang rings through the room. Helena's fist trembles against the shell of her armor, bracing her as her breathing comes in ragged, angry pants. Fury burns in her eyes, hot enough to melt the ice within and send it streaming endlessly down her cheeks. Her crystal blue eyes turn to Artorius. He stiffens. Pinned. Helpless under the weight of her challenge. Her demand.

“Say, Artorius? What if we didn't die here?”

His eyes widen slightly. His breath catches. The wildfire of her soul sparks and alights on his. Jaw tight, Artorius rises slowly, biting back a pained grunt as he leans against his own armor with a swaying shake in his knees. The two warriors let their gazes catch and hold. Determination. Ferocity. Vengeful resistance. The world will not best them. Not here. Not now.

They lean towards one another, each braced with a steady arm against their machines, and half broken bodies threatening to drag them back into the earth. Eyes lock. Lifetimes of war coalesce into this one, unifying thread. The two commanders nod and take a steadying inhale. Artorius staggers forward at the same moment Helena does. She manages to lean, then hop-hobble. Pain lances through her leg. Blinding. Agonizing. A stifled scream escapes her as her vision goes white, and she feels the world tip.

A strong arm grips her wrist and pulls. She bumps into a body. Solid. Steady. Artorius doesn't bother to stifle his shout of pain, and instead, the cry cuts through her fog and conjures her instinct. When the world returns to color, her arm is braced around Artorius' waist, steadying him while his shaking, but functional legs do the same for her. His broken arm dangles uselessly between them, mirroring the way her own leg sways without purpose. For a time, the two simply stand only by the grace of the other and simply breathe until the pain subsides to “functional” levels once more. Helena glances between them, and a wry smirk forms on her lips.

“Look at that, we're a whole person.”

Artorius snorts in amusement, but doesn't break into full laughter. Helena doesn't blame him, but does take comfort in the way his face visibly lessens in tension. Surprisingly, the first thought that hits her isn't the absurdity of using her sworn enemy as a human crutch. It's the fact that he's about the same height as her brothers.

⋈+⋈+⋈+⋈+⋈

If it weren't for Noe's sudden clapping, Helena wouldn't have noticed his stubborn sniffles a moment earlier. Instead, she finds herself looking at her little

brother with a gentle smile as he cheers on the performers' curtain call. Helena joins in the applause, shoving concepts of realism aside for now.

"Did you enjoy it?" Noe turns a teary smile to his sister and nods in response to her question.

"I never knew the tale of the first Golden Knight was so much more dramatic in person."

Helena scoffs quietly, and quickly looks back towards the stage as Noe's eyes light with curiosity. "History is penned by those who survive. Truth is canonized by those with power. Our myths are greatly embellished."

"You don't believe the tale?"

"More so the details surrounding it," she replies, standing slowly. "Not everything we see portrayed is the same as what we see on the battlefield."

Noe goes thoughtfully quiet. Helena doesn't break the silence until they've navigated the throngs of wealthy Etherians and escaped into the privacy of their ether-carriage. The Celderae grows smaller and smaller as they turn towards the capital's outskirts, and Noe sits in contemplative happiness from their outing. Only then does she speak.

"I return to the field in three days."

Noe's lips go tense. He closes his eyes, taking a deep breath that he lets out with reluctant acceptance. "When will you come back?"

"If all goes well, it could be as little as a week."

That earns a glance and a little smile. "I'll hope for a smooth mission, then."

Helena nods. Noe's arm relaxes as she reaches over to give him a comforting pat. "As do I."

⋈+⋈+⋈+⋈+⋈

They're gasping for breath and standing through sheer stupidity when their preparations are complete. Helena's arm is still locked around Artorius' waist like a vice, and his legs are shaking periodically as he stands in her stead. Above them, the seemingly endless waterfall of liquid etherite rages on but, instead of stone, the two soldiers stand on the torn fragments of their armor. Adrenaline races. Their hearts thunder a storm until they beat in time. Helena exhales slowly.

"Are you ready?" She's nearly startled dumb as her mother's gentleness

weaves into her voice.

“Ready as one can be,” Artorius replies with a steady, solid gasp. His shoulders square against her, and Helena fixes her gaze on the vision of death above. Affixed in the ceiling, the empowered crystal glows purple with challenge. A grim, reckless smirk returns to Helena’s face and the ghost of Markus’ bemused laughter rings in her ears.

“Do it.”

Magic glows in Artorius, coursing through him and embracing both soldiers. Helena can’t help the instinctive shiver of discomfort as sheer power engulfs her. Images of fanged teeth and reaching claws flash through her mind. Then, the spell drops to their feet. Artorius just huffs as Helena relaxes and lets out a shaky breath, but neither comment on her response. Now is not the time. Not if they wish to spite the universe.

She can’t help the gasp that the sudden movement under their feet shakes loose. Artorius is tense at her side, eyes closed, forehead furrowed in focus as he steadily levitates the metal under their feet higher and higher with every passing second. Wooziness threatens to wash over her when Helena chances a peek towards the floor, and she quickly redirects her focus to her portion of the plan. Everything relies on her now.

Jaw clenched, and expression drawn, Helena’s gaze fixes on that glowing crystal. She pays no mind to the threatening waves of color just beyond the barrier. She can’t afford to. There will be no second chance. There will be no redo. Either they live, or they come undone and are buried here, leaving their loved ones with only the weight of their sins for comfort. Her hand raises. Artorius goes pale with effort. Blue magic reflects against her bloody fingertips as they brush against the crystal’s purple glow.

Power like unfathomable rage burns through her, and she screams as energy suddenly shatters every particle in her body. There’s no comparison to Charger’s strength. The familiar warmth of ethereal energy has become a ranging, all consuming inferno that courses in her, through her, then beyond her. Artorius’ scream sounds like her own as she sees - *feels* - his magic flash from blue to purple. It rages. It shrieks. It *grieves*. Eons flow through them. In the midst of all-consuming agony, all they can see are the smiles of their loved ones beckoning them home.

The barrier above touches their hair, bowing. Bending. Encircling. It floods up and embraces them, weaving with the will of entwined desires. Liquid etherite courses over them, and suddenly, they break free of the ceiling. The barrier snaps, Artorius shouts, and Helena can feel the power of his magic entwine

with the ether in her veins. Purple glows around them as his magic forms a familiar shield, and with a final, violet blast, they're launched through the vicious fluid.

It hisses, battering against the spell as seconds become hours. Years. Millennia. Color and white dances around them until Helena is blind to all else. The purple fades. Artorius' barrier burns blue. He shakes against her, knees going weak. Sapphire energy fades to pale blue. Helena's breath catches in defiant anger. In preparation.

Cold air hits the shield as they break free of the flow and Artorius' spell shatters around them a second later. He slumps against her, unconscious, and Helena's world tumbles as the metal underfoot spins, launching them across onto another roof. Somewhere during their roll she loses her grip on the Solenite warrior. This time, ancient stone holds as flesh and bone crash into it. Their chaos echoes through the cavern. Fading. Growing more distant until the only sounds are the peaceful rush of the endless, etherite fall and Helena's fluttering breathing.

As her gaze steadies and the searing pain of her aggravated injuries fades, Helena spies the steady rise and fall of Artorius' chest where he lays in blissful unconsciousness. Slowly, she pushes herself upright and peeks over the low wall of the roof. Liquid etherite flows harmlessly below, past the hewn stone of building walls. Beyond stretches a city so vast that not even her stolen breath can reach the edges. Ancient. Steady. Waiting.

Helena chuckles softly, and her head drops back against the low wall once more. Artorius rests nearby, and she smiles as she closes her eyes to do the same. It seems their partnership will need to last a little longer.