

EN GARDE!

Juliet Constantine felt her uniform jacket grow heavier, not only from the light rain which fell from a leaden sky but also the cut of a sword which had parted the flesh beneath in crimson bloody pain. Her opponent stepped back and raised his sabre to the guard position before smiling and, with a slight shake of his head, cleared the water which had accumulated in the powdered hair upon his forehead.

"It seems M'lady that your skill with the sword is not as pristine as I have heard. Perhaps the late Captain Galahad of the 2nd Gardes was merry with wine when the affair of honour took place? Perhaps you took advantage of that?"

Her eyes did not waver from her opponent's face. Captain Constantine had gained a promotion in rank in the Gardes de Consuls mere weeks before and much had changed. Captain Galahad had died in the fall from the rooftop of the Academie de Dracci after he came near to defeating her in an affair of honour. Constantine's honour as a lady had been called into question by Galahad and now on this miserable afternoon one of his lackeys had finally caught up with her. She had been cornered and forced into confrontation.

"Lieutenant Valadon were you there? I think not. Had you been you would have known Galahad died with honour and chose the shortest route to the ground in defeat. I see no need for your offence in this. I do not know you and you knew the Captain only in passing despite his being in the same regiment. You are rather old for such a mere rank. Perhaps your family was far beneath his notice?"

Francis Valadon snarled at this and came forward once more his blade extended ready to strike. Constantine knew her barb had struck home but she also knew much had changed since the duel with Captain Galahad. Lyonesse and indeed the whole of the Empire was changing. Though she was not an Elf of great years she had long been a warrior and had been at the fortress bridge of Scarsiamort in near constant battle against the enemies of the Empress since then and ever since. Now those foes had seemed to seep away and fashions were changing too. Rumours abounded of a split between the two Crown Princes also.

"Galahad was more than you will ever be. He was true to his liege and I was his kinsman. This day will be your last. To the death!"

Their blades met and drew sparks from each other as they parted. Both swords were of the finest steel and as they met a second time Valadon leaned in meaning to push his opponent back and break her guard.

Constantine nimbly stepped backwards and allowed her opponent's momentum and greater weight to carry him forward. Her sword flicked up and with a scream Valadon staggered backward clutching at his face with his free hand. With a barely heard plop the tip of his nose landed in a puddle on the cold flagstones.



Things were changing in Lyonesse. The noble art of duelling was long practised and in many ways encouraged to keep warriors in fine form. This was different though. While most duels were to first touch or even first blood there was an increase of officers and soldiers fighting to the death over the most petty of reasons. One factor remained constant though in this change. These duels were always between one who could link their support to Crown Prince Mordred and one who could not. This was worrying as the Empress herself emerged less and less from the palace leaving ever more duties to Mordred her younger son.

"You will pay for that. I had been intending to blood you and then with a few cuts send you back to your own. Now though, now you will die."

Valadon came at her, blood streaming down his face, fainting to the left and right with his sabre in a rush intending to put Constantine on her heels. This was a tactic she was only too familiar with and it showed little skill. From it she knew he was a graduate of the Academie Ferach sword school. Her own École Imperiale schooling was robust and though she carried a sabre rather than the traditional longsword her riposte was the same and it was effective.

As Valadon ended his feints and lunged sword tip first towards her. Constantine turned to the side and his sword passed her. Her own blade reached out and cut deeply across his thigh and up to his ribs. With a howl Valadon dropped his sword and staggered away. She did not follow up instead raising her sabre to guard position and stepping forward to put herself atop the dropped sword.

"I think honour is settled Lieutenant do you not. Shall we leave it at this while you still can. I will accept your apology if it is freely given now."

Constantine had always lived in a world which shone with a lustre of Wylde Magicke and while it played little part in her daily life it glittered in every eye and every creature. She knew its radiance came from the Power Ring worn by the Empress Morgana but her absence had coincided with the dulling of the city. Lyonesse no longer has its shine and Mages had retreated from their towers and instead had opened workshops and artificers often sponsored by the younger Crown Prince.

Valadon stumbled and sat heavily. He made no attempt to speak and his face was a bloody mask of fury. Juliet Constantine was just about to lower her guard stance when her war accustomed eye made her hesitate.

The Lieutenant was reaching inside his sodden cloak and pulling something heavy free from its sheath. His powdered wig had fallen from his head. His own hair was thin and patchy. His teeth bared he spat blood and spoke.

"Honour? What do you know of it? You can take my answer as this!"

Expecting a throwing knife Constantine readied herself but she was shocked instead to see something else in Valadon's hand. It was a firelock pistol. He pointed it at her and pulled its trigger. There was the merest moment of silence before the shot boomed and a billow of grey smoke hid him from her. Her sabre was wrenched from her hand and her right shoulder jerked with an jarring impact. She spun and fell to one knee. Her sword had taken the bullet and its blade was now broken two thirds up its length. The last third was sticking out of her shoulder and the pain was intense.

Grunting, Constantine regained her feet and picked up Valadon's dropped sabre. She walked slowly towards the Lieutenant sword point extended. Valadon seemed stunned but he regained his senses before emitting a shriek, dropping the pistol and pulling himself away slowly across the stone flags of the wide avenue.

The small crowd of onlookers who had gathered, as they always did, for the duel did not part to allow Valadon through though. They knew more of honour than this cur did.

"Do you yield? I shall not enquire again."

Valadon ceased his efforts to part the crowd and returned his attention to Constantine.

"Yield. No. To the death as agreed. In this I am resolved. Yours will come soon enough."

Juliet Constantine changed her pose, readied herself and then with her sword in both hands made a practised swing and took Valadon's head clean from his shoulders. As the head tumbled the pain of her wounds returned.

It seemed symbolic though of what she could not possibly think...

