

A STORY OF PILEAUS



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A BITTER  
END



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## — PROLOGUE —

**S**trong hands shoved Kensey Vardallian forward. He tripped over his own bare feet but managed to catch himself even with his wrists shackled behind his back. The unmistakable weight and shape of a blade pressed itself to his jugular through the burlap sack covering his head.

“This is the man you asked for, Your Highness,” a crisp voice announced proudly. That tone belonged to a man used to making such proclamations. And royalty? That was interesting. The jailers hadn’t told him where he was being taken or for what reason. At the time, he’d assumed they’d tired of beating him and asking the same questions over and over and were delivering him to the gallows—but then they’d roughly bathed him, clothed him in a cheap but clean tunic and pants, and thrown him on a boat.

“Take that silly thing off his head,” a female voice ordered. That tone belonged to a busy ruler tired of wasting time on unnecessary etiquette.

“Yes, Your Highness.”

The pressure against Vardallian's neck relaxed. He closed his eyes and winced against the sudden burst of light as the sack was yanked back over his face and away from his head. A rough patch chafed his chin on its way past. When he opened his eyes a few moments later, he found himself in a throne room—or what was left of one, at least. What had once been a grand, soaring space trimmed with gold leaf and gargantuan columns had been reduced to a ruin. The rubble had been pushed to the sides, leaving a path from the main entrance to a raised dais and a throne. The wall beyond the royal seat had been blasted out entirely, leaving a jagged scar that overlooked the capitol city of Deos below and the harbor beyond. Shards of shattered glass twinkled in the bright sunshine that streamed in through that gap and washed out the prisoner's view of the figure upon the throne. He suspected that was intentional.

"My name is Losa ruo Deos," the woman said. "I am the Empress of Pileaus, and this is my palace. And you are?"

He didn't know much about the Imperial government, but last he'd heard, ownership of the Imperial throne hadn't been settled following the last Emperor's demise. Was this his daughter? From what he could see, she certainly looked the part. Clad in black plate armor, her long form filled the throne as if she'd been born in and always occupied that very spot. Her black hair, streaked with white, was pulled up tight underneath a dark, slender crown. His vision hadn't quite cleared enough to make out her facial features, but he could feel her hard gaze dissecting him from afar.

A familiar sliver of metal brushed against his bare shoulder. "You will answer the Empress's queries promptly," the guard to his right demanded.

That sounded like wise advice. “Vardallian,” he croaked through parched lips. “My name is Kensey Vardallian.”

“Get this man water and something to eat,” the empress commanded. Behind Kensey, the clack of boot heels on the polished marble floor confirmed acceptance of her order. The thought of a meal set his dry mouth struggling to water. The thin gruel he’d lived on in prison had left him weak and emaciated. Kensey knew for a fact that he was young and dumb, but he wasn’t stupid enough to think he wasn’t being manipulated.

“Do you know how many pretend Vardallians my father executed?” Losa asked. “A few dozen, I think. The emperor was not a man of idle hobbies, but your family’s history was one of them.”

Stories about Kensey’s seafaring ancestors—and their huge stash of treasure—had spread far and wide, but he’d never expected to hear of people faking a Vardallian lineage or that a person as powerful as Emperor Pileaus would take an interest. His upbringing in the distant south, far from the family’s ancestral home, had insulated him from the name’s infamy. He wished he’d managed to hold onto even a small shred of evidence proving that all the myths were true.

“I’m told you claim to have served aboard the *Black Yonnix*, and that you accurately described both the vessel’s special capabilities and its captain—and I began to wonder just how a southern peasant boy would have such knowledge of former Imperial property and personnel if his story were not at least partially true.”

Kensey’s brain knew it was best to remain quiet, but his mouth had never had much patience for one-sided conversations. “It’s true,” he said. “All of it.”

Losa stood, unfurling herself from the throne like a sail from a mast. The empress was easily the tallest woman Kensey had ever encountered. In that dense black armor, framed by the afternoon sun, she descended the dais like an avenging angel sent to smite the unworthy—which, if her father’s claims of godhood had any validity, may have been the case exactly. Her hard, stern face did little to dispel that impression.

“You sailed on a ship that sank eight of my own. Every syllable you utter had better be the absolute truth. You will tell me *everything*, and if it doesn’t lead me to the recovery of both the *Black Yonnix*—and your family’s treasure—you will wish Lagash had gutted you before he tossed you overboard.

“And you will start by telling me about Lucifus Vardallian’s journal.”

## — CHAPTER ONE —

**W**ritten by the dread pirate Lucifus Vardallian, scourge of the Steps—and my great-great-great uncle twice removed on my father’s side—that journal is the only remaining vestige of my family’s former wealth. Legend has it that the only thing Lucifus hated more than his own children was the idea of bequeathing his riches unto them. Grandfather, for what it’s worth, suspected our ancestor’s mind had been warped by alcohol or disease. Whatever his reasons, Lucifus secreted his treasure hoard away in an unknown location and left his cryptic journal behind so that, as the very first line reads, “any greedy rutter what has eyes on me gold and jewels don’t find it without a lifetime o’ work!” Supposedly it was bound in the skin of a Fae lord, but it always smelled like regular old leather to me. Family tradition was that only one child of each generation would learn how to read the journal. Grandfather taught me after my parents died. The journal seemed like nothing more than the ramblings of a crazy old man, but reading it was a special thing only



Grandfather and I could do, and so I enjoyed traipsing off into the jungle around our little home to do just that.

Which was exactly what I had been doing the day the journal was taken from me.

Emerging from the jungle, I instantly recognized the tall brown mare with the crimson saddlebags as the local tax collector's mount. Normally, Rocher made his yearly rounds alone, protected only by the dagger in his belt and the threat of his lord's sovereignty. He was about a month early by my reckoning, and the pair of black stallions tethered beside the mare meant he'd brought back up this time. Grandfather and the other poor villagers of Brennik's Reach typically sent him back to his master with little to show for himself. Evidently the Nefazo had decided to do something about that.

I ducked back behind the green foliage to consider the situation. Grandfather had always sent me away whenever one of the local children arrived to spread word that the tax collector was on his way. I know now that it was so he could deal with the slimy Nefazo without distraction or the possibility of threat to my welfare. Back then, three years younger and about three decades dumber than I am now, I thought it just another interesting situation an adult was keeping from me. The smart thing to do would've been to heed the little voice in the back of my mind that sounded suspiciously like Grandfather and retreat into the thick jungle from which I'd just emerged. Instead, I set my sights on the nearest window. Its shutters were closed as usual to keep the bugs out, despite the heat of the day. As the sole window on that side of the building, no one would be able to see me approaching through its slats. I kept my lean frame low to the ground as I skulked around the small herb garden between the jungle and my

home. My soft sandals moved silently through the thick, flaccid grass. Halfway to my destination, I noticed the familiar weight tapping my thigh inside the satchel at my side.

Yes, Your Highness, the journal was in my satchel. No, I didn't really consider stashing it in the jungle or the herb garden. That was not a day of sound decision making.

When I finally reached the house, my heart was pounding so hard that I feared Count L'Vaillee's men would hear it. I pressed my back to the wall and shuffled along to the window, impressed with how thoroughly sneaky I was being. There was no way I was going to get caught. In all eighteen of my years, I'd never done anything so exhilarating.

I settled in beneath the window to listen. The sounds of the argument taking place within the building echoed out into the otherwise serene landscape, setting my nerves even closer to the edge. The tax collector's thick, city-slicked voice demanded that my grandfather produce more coin; Grandfather's soft, creaky alto insisted that he'd already given up all he had, that there wasn't any more to be found. That was a bold-faced lie. My grandfather was the only doctor within two days of Brennik's Reach, and as such, he made an above-average living for a relocated Yuinite. I augmented our income by selling the rare flora I collected during my jaunts through the jungle. Between the two of us, we made enough to live in relative comfort while also stashing away what we hoped would one day become a big enough savings to send me to school in Mana'Olai. Grandfather had taught me everything he knew about being a healer, but he and I both knew I was going to need formal training if I would ever have any hope of leaving Brennik's Reach behind and making a better life for myself.

"We know there's more, old man," Rocher drawled impatiently. "You've been holding out on us for years. Where is it?"

"You know as well as I do there's no money to be made in this backwater," Grandfather snapped. He'd never shied away from the fact that he'd only fled the Empire because his parents had insisted he join them.

"Oh really? The Vendergott boys told us how much you charged for setting their mother's arm."

"Mrs. Vendergott died five years ago. You tried that same line last time you were here. I've given you all we have. Now, scoot!"

My chest swelled with pride. Grandfather was my hero, the one person in my life I could look up to. Our neighbors who'd known him here in the Empire loved telling me stories about his rugged upbringing. In his youth he'd been a huge, hulking brute of a man, sturdy as a fire oak and strong as a thul bear. He'd been a ferocious fighter, but he was also extremely intelligent and possessed an innate understanding of anatomy that served him well as a medic. At age fifty, he'd been the only refugee older than forty years of age to survive the harsh trek down from the north. Even my much younger parents hadn't made it. Now at sixty-eight years young, my grandfather may have been a bent, arthritic shell of his former self, but he wasn't about to let the count's goons intimidate him.

"Thuroth, just give us the money," the tax collector pressed. "It will serve you better in Count L'Vaillee's coffers than on Captain Lagash's ship."

*Pirates!* I thought happily to myself. *Here!* News traveled slowly to Brennicks Reach, but even we had heard the tales of the merciless Captain Lagash and his *Black Yonnix*, the former flagship of the Imperial navy and supposedly the fastest ship in the south. Piracy in the area was rare, but Lagash and his

crew had carved out quite a little niche for themselves. Even the shuen, the supposed guardians of the sea, were at a loss as to how to stop him. My ancestors had been some of the north's most nefarious privateers, the scourges of Braillee's Steps and Ururo Bay. But that was before the rise of Pileaus, before his empire and his blasphemy—uhh, sorry, Your Highness—drove my family and their people south.

My grandfather chuckled softly to himself, and I couldn't help but smile. "So the *Black Yonnix* and her fine crew have finally gotten sick of plundering the Mana'Olai and the shuen and have turned their attention to the Nefazo, eh? Old Count L'Vaillee must be shaking in his diamond studded britches!"

Antoine L'Vaillee was the local Nefazo lord, a man infamous throughout his holdings as a vicious, money-grubbing cheat who hid behind the vicious mercenaries that did all his dirty work. L'Vaillee's father, however, was then and probably still is revered in Brennisk's Reach. He'd welcomed our band of Yuinite refugees to Nefazo with a smile and a helping hand, providing most of the raw materials used to construct the new settlement. The elder L'Vaillee had seen our arrival as an opportunity to develop a previously uninhabited area while also welcoming a whole new group of grateful taxpayers to his domain. Antoine, however, raised our tax rates every year and took advantage of our remote location to sell us goods and services at prices often twice what they would cost elsewhere.

"Bah!" Rocher boomed. "Count L'Vaillee has nothing to fear from that dog. He's merely looking out for the wealth of his people, who may encounter great difficulty defending themselves against such criminals. Lagash would have no problem raiding a Yuinite stink hole like Brennisk's Reach, but he would

never be able to breach our fortress at Mont Lichaud. Your gold and valuables will be safe in the count's coffers."

I leaned tightly to the wall, awaiting Grandfather's next verbal riposte with bated breath. Surely it would send Rocher and his goons packing, empty-handed as always. I couldn't wait.

My heart leapt into my throat when a heavy hand took firm hold of my left shoulder. I tried to bolt, but the vice-like grip of those gloved fingers jerked me back off my feet and slammed me backwards down to the grass.

"Stupid," the mercenary said as he bent down and grabbed me by my hair. It was a lot longer back then, almost halfway down my back. I've kept it short and tight like this ever since.

I'll never forget the satisfied sneer on the mercenary's face as he yanked me up to my feet. Up to that point in my life, I'd mostly only interacted with the pacifist Yunitites of Brennik's Reach. Coming face-to-face with someone who simply enjoyed hurting people was a shock to my system. That man could've torn my hair right out of my scalp and then laughed about it. I had no choice but to follow him around the corner and through the front door. His blocky, scar-pocked face sometimes still haunts my nightmares. A short chain of tiny emeralds dangled from the lobe of his left ear, marking him as an inexperienced trader at best and thus fairly low on the Nefazo social ladder, which was probably the reason for his position as one of L'Vaillee's hired blades.

I didn't dare struggle as he dragged me around the corner. "In the house, whelp," he growled as he threw me forward. I stumbled through the open door, tripped on the threshold, and tumbled onto the floor. My satchel cushioned the impact to my torso, but the uneven wooden planks scraped my palms

and the side of my face unlucky enough to break my fall. See this scar on my jaw? If I ever managed to forget that day's unforgivable stupidity, my next look at this would bring those memories right back.

As I stood, I noticed our usually tidy little home had been reduced to a tangle of overturned furniture and equipment. Provisions spilled out of our ransacked cabinets. The table at which we took all our meals had been shattered into dozens of pieces and scattered across the room. The greedy bastards had even flipped the beds and torn the straw out of our mattresses. Count L'Vaillee's men came to collect his tribute once a year, and though they generally took any piece of gold their slimy fingers came across, I'd never seen them leave that sort of destruction in their wake. I tried not to look too hard at the loose floorboard under which we'd hidden our savings.

Grandfather sat in the center of the house, naked, in the wooden tub we used for bathing. The big old ox barely fit in the thing. His knees were pulled up tight to his broad chest and every motion sent a dollop of soapy water splattering to the floor. I'm sure the tax collectors thought they were putting him in an awkward situation by barging in on him in a compromising position, but he'd obviously turned things in his favor by making it clear he didn't care. He scrubbed his armpit with a brush, feigning disinterest in my arrival. His dark eyes, though, told an entirely different story—one I'd only encountered a few times prior while watching him reassure terminal patients that everything was going to be ok.

"Found this one listening by the window, Lord Rocher" the merc said. "Thought you'd like to meet him."

Forgive my vulgarity, but if Your Highness has ever encountered a pregnant sow wrapped in and sweating through a set

of red satin sheets, well—then Your Highness already has an excellent picture of the rutting Lord rutting Rocher. He loomed in the corner, strategically beyond soaping distance, his beady little eyes twinkling with malice. Jewels and charms of all shapes and colors speckled his short, dirty blond hair, marking him as a successful merchant and thus a man of high status in Nefazo society. He was flanked by a second soldier almost identical to the one that had caught me. Perhaps the two were identical twins; perhaps the hardships of mercenary life had simply twisted them into similar shapes.

“What’s the boy’s name, Thuroth?”

Grandfather sighed. “His name is Kensey, after his father.”

“There’s a definite family resemblance. Boy’s got your square jaw and brutish shoulders.” The pig paused for dramatic effect. I could practically smell the grease dripping from his vile grin. “It’d be a shame if something happened to him.”

Grandfather used his brush to flick a soapy gob across the room and mark the access to our secret stash. “Lift that floorboard.”

My heart sank as the mercenary beside Rocher lumbered toward our savings. If I hadn’t been such an idiot, Grandfather never would have been forced to give up that secret. They could’ve threatened to hurt him, or to burn down the house, or to turn our fields fallow—he would’ve stonewalled them through it all. I was the only leverage they could’ve successfully used against him.

The Nefazo dropped to his knees and drew a short knife from his boot. He used it to slowly pry the board up out of the floor, wary of the traps that existed only in his imagination. He reached one hand down into the hole, fished around, and

retrieved the little brown bag of gold that contained our entire life savings. Rocher snatched the bag away and peered inside.

“That’s it?” the pig asked. “Check again, Remy.”

The merc shrugged and did as commanded. As he rooted around underneath our house, I wished we’d filled that hole with scorpions or a hoosa snake or at least a few brend nettles—anything to reflect some of the pain I felt back upon our tormentors. Grandfather used to laugh whenever I’d suggested we boobytrap that hole. I wondered then if he regretted it.

Rocher pocketed our savings and turned his attention back to Grandfather. “How old is the boy?”

“Eighteen.”

The pig sauntered a few steps closer to the tub. The mercenary that’d caught me matched his master’s movement.

“Old enough to have started a family of his own,” Rocher said. “You know the rules, Thuroth: unwed adult males are to report to the nearest garrison for conscription. We’ve a pirate problem on our hands, after all.”

“I do know the rules, and the rules say that exceptions are made for those responsible for the welfare of their elders. In case you haven’t noticed, I’m rutting old. I couldn’t get by without my grandson.”

That sent a flash of pride radiating through my chest. Grandfather didn’t distribute praise lightly. That warm feeling didn’t last, however, as the three Nefazo closed in on the old man like the pincers of some vicious trap.

“So, to clarify,” Rocher hissed, “your grandson is not contributing to the glory of his honorable benefactor, Count L’Vaillee, because he has to stay here and take care of your decrepit old ass?”



Grandfather's face twisted in anger and his knuckles went white around the handle of his brush. He burst upward out of the bath, only to be pushed right back down into it by the nearest merc. Grandfather's bare feet and legs shot up toward the ceiling as Remy shoved his torso and head underneath the water. Suds splashed everywhere as his hands groped wildly for purchase on the sides of the tub.

"Don't let go until he stops kicking," Rocher instructed calmly, like he was telling a servant how best to mop the floor or scrub a counter.

For a moment, I couldn't move. It was like I simply couldn't process the horrific scene before me as part of the real world. Ours was a peaceful, cooperative village populated with good Yuinites doing their best to live in the image of the Oprin. No one fought. No one tried to hurt each other. That someone could walk into my home and attempt to murder my grandfather—and do it so casually—was a thing I'd never imagined possible.

Then the anger and adrenaline kicked in. I launched myself toward Remy, thinking to knock him away from Grandfather. I might've succeeded if I hadn't screamed. The other mercenary—the one who'd caught me outside—lashed out with his left arm. It was like getting hit with a tree. The impact broke my nose and rattled my skull. The landing knocked the wind right out of me. As Grandfather's thrashing grew weaker, all I could do was lie on the floor as blood streamed down my face, gasping for breath and praying to the Oprin that the room would stop spinning.

The thrashing stopped. I closed my eyes and started to cry, sure that I was next.

“Check his bag,” Rocher ordered. My satchel was ripped from my torso.

*Not the journal, I thought desperately. Leave me something!*

“Just some jungle herbs and an old book,” the merc said. He didn’t know what he was looking at. There was a chance.

“I had absolutely no idea you Yuinite worms knew how to read!” Rocher exclaimed. He opened the front of his robe and tucked Lucifus’s journal into an inside pocket. “The count’s son has developed quite an interest in obscure texts. I’m sure he will enjoy this.”

The pig knelt down beside me and grabbed my cheeks with his fat fingers. “I could squash you like an insect if I wanted to, boy,” he growled. “But I think instead I will leave you alive, so you can continue to work for the glory of the good Count L’Vaillee. Don’t forget: marriage and taxes, or service in the count’s military! We’ll be back in a few months to find out how it went!”

He released me and they departed. I rolled onto my stomach and watched the count’s men meander triumphantly through the front door of the house, taking with them my grandfather’s life and the dingy old pages that concealed my one chance to reclaim my family’s lost glory. Shame and anger burned through my veins, turning my vision red. Rocher’s last words of warning echoed through my skull.

*Come back in a few months, pig, I thought. I’ll be ready for you.*