
REQUIEM
of the
ECLIPSE
JON ASTASHINSKY

A Nostone universe standalone

Requiem of the Eclipse

Sample · Prologue & Chapter One

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NOSTONE

SAMPLE · PROLOGUE & CHAPTER ONE

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Published by Nostone Media
nostonemedia.com

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Prologue: The Last of the Pillars

Tens of thousands of corpses littered the plain. Hundreds of thousands, maybe. There was no counting them. The dead lay stacked so high that the field looked more a dumping ground than a graveyard.

They were of every race, an impossible mixture of colors. Mounds of flesh threaded through with metal. Ground troops tangled with airborne couriers, war correspondents with trading envoys. Death everywhere, and death without preference. The sheer volume of the dead was only a fragment of what the enemy could do.

Alta could still hear their final moments. Foreign tongues, dialects she had never learned, and every one of them saying the same thing. Suffering past measure. A fate worse than death. And then it was quiet. The quiet made a sound of its own, and it was not one of triumph.

It would take a lifetime to forget, and she had one hundred lifetimes to try. She needed to remember anyway. Because this would happen again.

The burials alone would take a decade or more, if every one of the fallen was to receive their rites in accordance with the Keystone. Every one of them would. Alta would see that her Pillars kept each of the Keystone's commandments, however monumental the task ahead of them.

The Clarions, those who had survived, she would send back to the Hearth ahead of her. They would carry the word home the same way they had carried it out. With the truth.

There were no Bastions left to send. All of them had perished somewhere in the sea of bodies that lay before her, her own Bastion among them, fallen within reach of where she knelt, his gray lance beside him. The Threads too, and they had been far less likely than the Bastions to survive this. Alta was the last of the Pillars on the battlefield.

The members of her Pillars she would bury with her own hands. Last, most likely, after the rest of the fallen, as many of them would have wished. They would be tended with the same care as every other being that was now with Alowah.

She tried to prepare a prayer to Alowah. It was the only thing she could think to do. Her body trembled in the silence as she reached for one, any of them, the words she had recited from memory since she was a kitten. They stuck in her throat. Decades of preparation, and none of it had readied her for this emptiness.

Alta looked to the sky. Debris crowded the night, cruisers and cargo vessels, satellites, the orbital defense platforms, all of it shattered and drifting. There would be no telling which piece had belonged to which faction. Their colors and banners were as entangled as the bodies on the ground. Clearing the sky alone would take centuries. Alta would leave that task to the next generation of colonizers.

And this was one field. Beyond the ridge the cities had gone quiet in the same hour, the ones she could see and the ones she had only ever heard named, and nothing on this world that had drawn breath that morning was drawing it now, save the handful on this field. A whole world, gone under the dark while she sat with a head in her lap.

There always was another generation.

The Clarions had served well, despite their numbers. For millennia they had preached what fate awaited those who would not follow Alowah. It was

the ones who stayed who had perished. They chose not to listen. It came for them anyway.

Alta knew the truth in this. Her Preceptor had told her what the aftermath would be. Days ago she had accepted it. Now that she was looking at it, it was something else entirely. How could anyone accept this?

She answered her denial with doctrine. Insatiable greed. A thirst for power. Hearts closed to Alowah. This was their earned fate. It did not feel earned. And that troubled Alta more than anything else. She should not let her feelings cloud her judgment.

Alta looked down at her lap. Her tail was still curled around her Preceptor's head. He was with Alowah now. He had been with Alowah for hours. She could not make herself let go, duty or no duty. She stayed a moment longer with his final words.

I'm proud of you, kitten. Now you've seen it. Do better than me.

She stared into his empty eyes. They had been so full of life and color. She would have followed those eyes anywhere.

And without a prayer to say or a leader to follow, she screamed. It was nothing befitting the First Thread. She screamed anyway. Everything her training had pruned out of her came flooding back, and her eyes ran with it.

Only silence met her. There was no one left to listen. She told herself she should be relieved. The vast majority of her people were safe in the Hearth. Her people could rebuild.

She screamed at the Zoliath as it came out of hiding, out from behind the Shadow. The record had a name for the black mass, and she had learned it as a kitten and never once believed in it, and now the Shadow had taken everything she cared for. The Zoliath's bright light broke past the edge of the dark in a crescent. It reached the plain and the plain gave nothing back. Fur, feathers, shell. None of it warmed. It smiled at Alta, who had nothing left to smile about.

Alta would see the arbiter of death again. And next time, she would be ready for the eclipse.

PART 1: ASCENSION

Chapter 1: Requiem

"Discipline."

Requiem felt his ribs crack, all of them at once, as a rod of dense-grained wood drove into his side. The blow would have felled a rooted tree. It did not fell Requiem.

He drove his talons into the stone. The air screeched as he slid, and he came to rest a few feet back. His opponent had not moved from where he had made the strike, unbothered that Requiem now stood beyond his staff's reach. The Second could have followed through easily enough. But he wasn't after a kill. He was after a lesson.

They had claimed a roadside clearing every morning since leaving the Bastion's Arch. This one was a flat shelf of stone beside the road where some earlier traveler had cut a fire ring long ago. Old fires had blackened the middle of it, and the soot came off on his feathers every time the Second put him down. Eleven mornings on the road home, eleven duels. The Second called it keeping the rust off. Requiem called it eleven new scars, though never out loud.

Even as a lesson, the pain was excruciating. Requiem had cracked his ribs more times than he cared to count, and familiarity had never numbed it. His

eyes watered. He clenched his beak around a hard breath. His body would heal quickly. Not completely, though. Not before the staff came again.

And he was right. The staff rose from its lazy drift into a soldier's poise in the space of a blink. The words came next. The Second fought the way he prayed, calling his blows from the Keystone, a section for every strike, chosen to fit the failing it was meant to correct. He always gave the verbal lesson before the physical one. It was a false courtesy. Bastions greener than Requiem fell for it, because it let them anticipate, and anticipation was how you found yourself with broken bones.

Requiem watched his Preceptor give the signal. It should have been forewarning enough to dodge, block, or parry what came next. It never was.

"Devotion."

Requiem knew this song and dance. He moved ahead of the words, with a song of his own.

He pulled his lance upright. Of his three weapons it was his favorite, and not only because it was the family heirloom, handed down for more generations than anyone had counted. But now he had to let it go. Its weight had slowed the fight one beat shy of the pace he needed.

He clenched both sets of claws around the shaft and slammed the weapon down. The lance bit deep into the hard rock and stood upright, gray end to end, still towering two heads over him.

The Second's wooden staff met the lance's gray shaft. The blow could have taken an Untried's head from their shoulders. The contact cracked like thunder and threw dust across the clearing. When it settled, the verdict was plain. The lance had held. The staff had not.

The Second didn't flinch. He held the surviving third of his staff as if it were still whole, and he would have fought on to prove it, so Requiem didn't waste a breath letting him.

He drew the two curved short blades from behind his waist. The Twins rang free, a matched pair of dark crescents, thin as flight feathers, their

guards swept up into prongs like a raised crest. He would be faster now. Fast enough, maybe, to take the offensive.

He made his move, ribs freshly whole, and found his Preceptor already waiting to deliver the next lesson.

"Atonement."

The last attack had been a feint, theatrics and all. Now the elder danced a tune Requiem didn't know, and with the tune came the blow. His left thigh shattered under the mangled staff.

Requiem rode out the agony. His ribs were back in form, and now his leg was gone. He would be finishing this fight on one leg, then. He kept his grip on the Twins. The lance was out of the fight for good.

He shifted his weight onto his right leg and right shoulder, hooked his left wing around the lance, and vaulted himself at the Second. It was a desperate attack. He hoped it would be desperate enough to catch his Preceptor off guard.

Hope was not a plan, and Requiem learned that lesson again.

The Second swung his broken staff behind his back, where no eye could track it. It didn't matter. Requiem wasn't tracking it anymore. He would have the advantage. He just had to get close. Before he closed the distance, he heard his final lesson of the duel.

"Mercy."

It was the last thing Requiem heard before the front of his head was caved in.

* * *

When he regained his vision, his head was set ablaze. *Cracked skull and a concussion,* Requiem thought. It wasn't his first, so he knew the sensation. His crest was stuck flat on one side with blood, and the inside of his beak tasted of it. His brain felt intact, at least. He would have known otherwise.

One bad training incident had left him unable to remember how to tie his own robe.

He lay where he'd fallen and let his head spin. Eyes closed, bones mending, he walked back through what had gone wrong. Slowly, the world steadied.

The bold move at the end, that was the mistake. He had never once thrown himself at the Preceptor. He sat up. The Second Blade sat a few feet away, legs crossed, deep in prayer.

His unadorned robes were weathered and black. They matched his feathers, which carried an added gradient of gray through the pattern. He was old, older than Requiem's father, and as strong as any bird in his prime. His crest had gone ragged past what any preening could order. His joints announced themselves when he sat and when he rose, and he denied every word of it. His eyes were silver, like every Bastion's in the Pillar.

Requiem rose. His left thigh answered with a deep ache, the bone newly knit and not yet done knitting, but it took his weight. It would finish its complaining somewhere on the road home. He left his bow where it was, still strung across his wing. He hadn't needed it in the duel and he wouldn't need it now. He took the perch beside the Second and folded into an identical stance. This was the part Requiem was no good at. He was a faithful member of his Pillar, of the Bastions. His faith in Alowah, the All, came harder.

He believed in something higher, that much he was certain of. But the Keystone always came apart on him in the same place, the final record, where the teachings promised an eclipse that would swallow the world. What manner of god wrote an ending into her own book and called it a promise? He had never dared say that aloud, and he had never managed to put it down either. For all of that, he respected his Preceptor enough to follow his lead.

Requiem closed his eyes and did his best to clear his mind. He sat in the silence and thought about the day ahead instead. The insects had started up

in the grass at the edge of the shelf. Beside him the Second's breath came so slow that Requiem twice thought he had stopped. Requiem's feathers softened and his tail flicked. He was, despite his ribs, in a good mood. A long hour passed, as expected, and it could have gone on for many more if his luck ran bad. The silence broke just before true boredom set in.

"Your mind is not clear," the old bird chirped.

Requiem cracked one eye open, checking whether the Second had actually opened his own and observed something, or was merely dispensing another platitude. The latter. Requiem braced for the rest of it.

"Hatchling. Without a clear mind, you are too predictable."

Hatchling. Predictable, he could learn from. But being called a child still needled him after all these years. However many times that staff had laid him on his back, it was the words that left the marks.

What child had risen from Untried to Third Blade inside two decades? He was the fastest Sworn to become a Blade in the history of his Pillar. Only two surpassed him now, and one of them was sitting beside him. Requiem was certain he would surpass his Preceptor within a few years at most.

He thought about telling his elder as much, and thought wiser of it. His father had raised him better than that. So Requiem offered a different truth instead.

"It has not been clear. Not for some days."

The Second didn't respond. He waited for Requiem to share more. He had a mouth on him in battle, but out of it, he knew when to listen.

"The Ascendant speaks tomorrow." He let it hang. "I stood before her once. I never saw her." It was a truth.

Not all of one. Lying was against the Keystone, and this was as near to honest as anyone could expect of Requiem. The rest was his own. They were going home, for the first time in a decade, and home meant his father, and a doorway, and whatever he would find to say when he finally stood in it. Ten years of training had honed his mind to a point. It took one bird to blunt it.

"The Ascendant answers to the All. So does your mind. Keep it clear."

"Yes, Preceptor." Requiem clasped his talons together and bowed his head in thanks. He was so practiced at receiving platitudes that the gesture had become one itself.

The weathered Preceptor gathered his broken staff and rose on stiff, careful feet. Battle wasn't calling today. Today called only for the elder Requiem had named teacher since he was sixteen.

They were both from Talon's Beak, as it happened, which was why they were headed home together at all. A funny name for a home, to be sure, but it was home. The First had granted them twelve days of leave before their audience with the Ascendant. The order had come by courier, as all word came from their leader these days, and it commanded every member of the Pillar to make passage to the Ascendant's Arch. As two of the Pillar's three highest-ranking birds, Requiem and his Preceptor had been the last to depart the Bastion's Arch, which left them the least leave of anyone. It did not help that they walked the distance.

"Up. An hour to the Beak." His Preceptor motioned onward with the stump of his staff. The Second was not a bird to go anywhere without a staff, so Requiem was sure it would be mended before they left the village the following morning.

Requiem collected his things quickly. He found the Twins and set them behind his waist, settled the bow, and pulled his lance free of the rock. He was ready.

Together, they would have flown to Talon's Beak, had it not been the same place that had clipped Requiem's wings.

Chapter two is free

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