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THE AURELIAN CYCLE

Fireborne (May 2025)

Flamefall (July 2025)

Furysong (September 2025)

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PROLOGUE

Later, he would be known as the First Protector, and under his vision the city would transform. Serfs would be freed, schools would be built, and dragons would, for the first time, be ridden by commoners.

Before that, he was the leader of the bloodiest revolution his people had ever seen.

He never doubted that he would create a just city. Nor did he doubt that the families of the old regime deserved to die. But he did, sometimes, regret the way it happened, the day the palace was finally overrun.

He remembered in particular one of the ruling families, their tormentors still at work when he found them. The dragonlord had been kept alive, to watch; his youngest son was the only child left. A boy of about seven or eight, his expression blank beneath a mask of blood. The remains of their family lay around them.

“Stop this foolishness at once,” the First Protector said, when he and his guard found them.

The revolutionaries let go of the boy, whom they had been

hurting, and began to protest: This man is Leon Stormscourge, don't you know what he's done—but they fell silent when the dragonlord spoke from his knees on the bloodstained carpet.

"My son," he said, in the language he and the First Protector shared. "Please, Atreus."

The First Protector took a half glance at the child. He said, "Leo will be looked after."

He gave one of his guards a murmured order. The soldier started, hesitated, and then lifted the dragonlord's son in his arms. When the boy had been carried, limp and silent, from the room, the leader of the revolution knelt before the dragonlord.

"Those—animals—" the dragonlord rasped.

The First Protector did not disagree. Instead, he put a hand to the knife on his belt. When he met the dragonlord's gaze, it was in an unspoken question. The dragonlord closed his eyes and nodded.

Then, to the First Protector's surprise, he spoke.

"Your vision," he said. "Do you think it will ever be worth this, Atreus?"

The First Protector drew his knife.

"Yes," he said.

The dragonlord's question returned to him often in the years that followed. Even as many of the other details of the Revolution began to fade from his memory, he remembered Leon Stormscourge.

Leon's son, on the other hand, was a detail he forgot.

MESSAGES FROM THE MINISTRY

Nine Years Later

LEE

Morning is our favorite time to fly. Today, even with the tournament looming and the empty arena below us a reminder that soon we'll be watched, for the first time, by thousands, it's still possible to savor the city sprawled beneath a dragon's wings. When we pull tight on a turn, I glimpse one of Pallor's black eyes, depthless, turned on me. The line between us, of shared emotions and thoughts that are usually latent in the saddle, goes taut. Yes. Today it begins. Today we'll rise.

But in order to do that, I'll need a clear head. I gently extricate myself from Pallor's simmering anticipation and refocus on the arena. Two other dragonriders fly with us, each riding one of the other two breeds: Crissa and her skyfish are in the air above us, while Cor and his stormscourge glide below, bellowing ash over the arena stands. We're on our last rehearsal, this time with just the squadron leaders.

I lift my voice over the wind. "You're taking her too low, Cor."

Cor grunts, frustrated, and urges his stormscourge higher. We've rehearsed the choreography of the tournament's opening

ceremony over and over with ministry officials, and every time, the question of how to demonstrate the might of the storm-scourge breed becomes tricky. Before the Revolution, the dragons of Stormscourge House—of my family—were known for terrorizing the countryside; but in even older days, they were our island’s greatest defense against aerial invasion.

“They told us to fire low,” says Cor.

“Not *that* low. It’s risky for the audience.”

Our dragons are immature, barely horse-size, and can’t yet breathe fire. But the smoke they produce can still burn.

Crissa and her skyfish, long, slender, and pale enough blue to blend with the morning sky, circle above us. “You want to impress the people,” she calls down to Cor. “Not roast them.”

Cor waves a hand. “All right, all right . . .”

The fleet is still in training, dragons and riders both. Known now as Guardians, the new regime’s dragonriders are lowborn, commoners, even former serfs. No longer the sons of dragonlords.

Except for me, though I’m the only one who knows that.

Because in the wake of the Revolution, to be dragonborn is to be wanted for dead. I was born Leo, son of Leon, dragonlord of Stormscourge House and Drakarch of the Far Highlands—but, since the orphanage, I’ve been Lee. Not even the First Protector, who saved my life and then welcomed me, without recognition, into his Guardian program two years after that, knows the truth.

That a Stormscourge tested into the meritocratic dragon-riding program designed to replace everything his family stood for.

Even though I know I’m lucky to be here—lucky to be alive,

lucky to have escaped the orphanage—memories of the old life have a way of intruding and twisting. Especially today, as Pallor and I circle above the Palace arena, open to the public for the first time since the Revolution. The old regime had tournaments here, too. Tournaments I watched my father compete in, dreaming of the day it would be my turn.

I lean forward and rest a gloved hand on Pallor's silver-scaled neck as his wings, translucent in the morning light, tighten in a dive. Pallor is an aurelian, a smaller breed known for being careful and maneuverable, and the aurelian formation for today's ceremony is the only one complex enough to require coleaders. I can rehearse alone, but to do the thing properly, I need—

Annie. There she is.

Another aurelian, this one amber-toned, has emerged from the cave mouth at the base of the arena, and on her back rides my sparring partner, Annie. She and I have trained together for as long as we've been in the Guardian program, and we've known each other since the orphanage before that.

It's a past life's worth of memories that we're both pretty good at not talking about.

"Annie!" Crissa calls with a cheerful wave. "There you are."

"Lee's been flying like an idiot out here without you," Cor says.

Pallor and I fire ash downward. Cor dodges the stream with a bark of laughter.

Annie's lips curve at Cor's remark, but instead of answering, she rolls seamlessly into formation opposite me, her dragon, Aela, mirroring Pallor's movements. Annie's red-brown braid hangs low on her back, her pale freckled face set in concentration. I've

thought of Annie as beautiful—strikingly beautiful—for almost as long as I can remember, but I’ve never told her that.

“Take it from the top?” I suggest.

There are calls of assent from the other three.

We right ourselves only when the bell rings the hour. The arena below, the Palace to one side and the karst pillar supporting Pytho’s Keep on the other, the jagged rooftops, the plains stretching out to the sea—for a moment I feel a protectiveness, almost a possessiveness, of the city and island spread below. The vows that we took when we became Guardians echo in my mind: *All that I am belongs to Callipolis. By the wings of my dragon I will keep her . . .*

Today, eight of the Guardians will compete in the quarterfinal tournament for Firstrider, commander of the aerial fleet. I’m one of those eight, along with Annie, Cor, and Crissa. Qualifying rounds have been going on among the thirty-two dragonriders for weeks.

It will be the first time since the Revolution that Callipolis names a Firstrider, one of the few titles it’s kept from the old regime. The dragons of the revolutionary fleet are finally old enough, and their riders well-enough trained, to vie for a position that’s been vacant since the Revolution. For the other Guardians, the Firstrider Tournaments are a chance to prove themselves; for me, it will be that and something more.

Because *Firstrider* is a title I’ve wanted since before the Revolution. It would be all the recognition, power, and respect that my family lost over the course of a single bloody month when I was eight years old, regained.

Firstrider.

Distantly, below, the bells of the Palace clocktower are tolling.

I rouse myself. “We should get in for breakfast. Goran said he’d have the tournament bracket ready by then.”

We land on the Eyrie, the jutting stone platform that rises from the center of the arena, where we dismount, unsaddle our dragons, and dismiss them to their nests in the caves below. Back in the Palace, we find the rest of the Guardian corps, thirty-odd students in all, trickling into the Cloister refectory from the dorms. The walls of the refectory are bare stone, the windows high and narrow, breakfast the usual slightly burnt porridge. Though we are technically Palace residents, we live in what were, before the Revolution, servants’ quarters.

“You’re up early.”

Duck, Cor’s younger brother, has scooted on his bench to make room for us where he’s sitting with some friends. Though Duck and Cor share olive skin and wavy hair, in manner they’re opposites, Cor tending to scowl where Duck wears an open smile. Annie slides comfortably onto the bench beside Duck. They’re both sixteen, a year younger than most of us. While it was the first commonality that brought them together, they remained friends because Duck seemed to like the challenge. It’s hard to get Annie to smile, and Duck’s good at it.

Duck lifts his spoon from his porridge and cocks it in Annie’s direction. “Ready for your big day?”

Annie snorts, but all the same, color enters her cheeks. A rare glimpse of ambition she usually keeps close to the vest. She is hunching again: Always, on the ground, Annie hunches, as if hoping to take up less space. It’s a jarring contrast to her confidence in the air.

Crissa tells Duck, in the bracing voice she pulls out whenever she’s encouraging riders in her squadron: “Your big day, too.”

Duck lifts his shoulders, grin flagging. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.”

Like the four of us, Duck made it into today’s quarterfinals. He’ll do great—depending on how he handles his nerves, and who he’s up against.

“Nervous, Dorian?”

Speaking of which. Power, one of the qualifying storm-scourge riders, has passed us on his way from the serving counter. He drapes an arm around Duck’s shoulder, as if he were encouraging him, and flicks a spare palm over close-shaven black hair as he locks eyes with me. Power is around my height and weight, and this has always been the kind of calculation I make, and can tell he’s making, when we look at each other.

Duck has gone rigid. “Get your hands off me,” he says through gritted teeth.

Cor sets down his glass with a click on the hardwood table. I return my spoon to a resting position in the bowl of porridge.

It’s almost disappointing when Power withdraws his arm. He’s become more careful in recent years. “Jumpy, are we?”

He wanders back to the empty seat between Darius and Alexa, who have been watching our interchange apprehensively. The tension slides out of Duck’s shoulders, and he makes a guttural noise of disgust.

“Sometimes,” Cor muses, “I miss the days when patrician kids like Power got away with stuff, and it was up to us to keep them in line.”

“I don’t,” Duck mutters.

In the old regime, my family was among the ruling dragon-born, and the patrician families like Power’s were a tier below,

wealthy but dragonless. Power holds the usual patrician disdain for commoners like Cor and Crissa and, most damningly, Annie, who is not only a commoner but a former serf.

Crissa murmurs, "I'm sure Goran misses those good old days, too."

Her eyes narrow on the doorway of the refectory, where a single adult has entered the room. Goran, our patrician drill-master, is a ruddy-faced, aging, formerly fit officer gone to seed, with traces of a Dragontongue accent that he thickens when he wants to intimidate lowborn riders. The sight of him has always been unsettlingly familiar. We must have crossed paths in the years before, but he's never recognized me, and that's all that matters. Goran's loyalty to Atreus is apparent; to the ideals of the Revolution, less so. Before Atreus put his foot down, Goran let Power and the other patrician Guardians get away with almost anything.

"Morning, Guardians," Goran tells the room. "Ready to hear the bracket for today's matches?"

The tables go silent. Goran begins to read from his list. "We've got Annie versus Darius—"

Darius, one of Power's patrician friends in the stormscourge squadron, turns around to look at Annie, and I'm pleased to see that his usual easygoing bravado has been replaced by a furrowed brow. Annie folds her arms and glares back.

"—Cor versus Rock—"

Cor scowls despite the fact that it's a decent pairing, no doubt calculating the possible combinations left to be assigned. Specifically, who might be paired with Duck.

"Next we'll have Lee and Crissa—"

Crissa lets out a groan and presses her palms to her forehead

in a theatrical gesture of dismay, then locks her eyes on mine. Crissa has the kind of face—perpetually sun-flushed, framed by dark gold curls streaked with blond—that, when you stare at it, you end up allowing your gaze to linger on too long. She lifts an eyebrow playfully.

“Do your worst, Lee.”

I can feel myself blushing for reasons that have nothing to do with the match. Crissa smirks. Cor rolls his eyes.

After ours comes the final pairing, the one we all saw coming as soon as Goran paired me and Crissa.

“Finally, we’ll have Power versus Duck.”

Power lets out a trilling drumroll, but he’s the only one who looks pleased. Duck has sunk low in his seat; Cor’s face has tightened. Annie’s arm moves ever so slightly, as if squeezing Duck’s hand beneath the table. Duck is one of the only people I have ever seen Annie touch voluntarily, and she does so often. Now, as she takes his hand, he perceptibly swallows.

According to Cor, they’re not together. But even if they’re not, it’s pretty clear Duck’s smitten. He has been for years and yet still Annie touches him like this, casually, as if they’re still kids—oblivious, as far as I can tell. Annie used to touch me like that, in the orphanage. She stopped when we came here.

I realize that Duck is staring at me, staring at him. We look away from each other at once.

“You’ve got a little over an hour till the opening ceremony,” Goran says, “so I’d recommend you get moving. How many of you have family coming today?”

There’s a show of hands. Pretty much everybody; Annie and I are the predictable exceptions. But then I see Annie’s fingers lifted a bit off the table. She is studying them as if surprised herself.

That doesn't make sense. How could Annie have family coming?

"Save the greetings for the end," Goran says. "But feel free to take the rest of the day off. Madam Mortmane will be doing sign-outs by the Cloister entrance. Any questions?"

When there aren't, he catches my eye. "Lee, Annie, a word."

I can't remember the last time Goran wanted to speak with Annie. We wait, seated, as the others take their leave and Goran assumes a vacant chair at the head of the table. I can almost feel the tension riddling Annie's body at his proximity. Although years have passed since he's outright bullied her—the extra chores, the arbitrarily low marks, the ridicule on the Eyrie—Goran has never stopped treating Annie's presence on the corps as particularly offensive, as if her status as a former serf, compounded with her gender, were one too many of Atreus's innovations to be tolerated in one person.

"I've got notes from the ministry, one for each of you."

He hands me mine, then Annie hers. As usual, he avoids looking at her, like she's a perversion to keep in his peripheral vision.

My note is stamped with the seal of Atreus Athanatos, the First Protector.

"Read them later," Goran says. "You're dismissed."

We stop together in the corridor outside to tear open our notes. Atreus has handwritten a single phrase. I read it, and for the first time today, the acid jolt of nerves hits my stomach.

Good luck, Lee.

I look up. Annie is still reading, frozen. Then her shoulders go up, and she tears her eyes away from her note.

"We should get to the armory," she says.

By the time we arrive, the rest of the corps are getting ready to head underground to the dragon nests. Annie and I make our way to the aurelian squad's cubbies amid riders shrugging on flamesuits, hooking on their last few plates of armor, and slinging tack over their shoulders to carry down to the caves. The room smells of leather, sweat, and ash: the smells of dragonriding.

I feel something pressed into my hand; Annie has passed me her note and turned away. Inviting me to read it but unwilling to watch as I do.

Our cubbies are side by side; in recent years I've trained myself to stare at anything, anything in the *world*, other than Annie when she's changing uniforms. Today, I stare at her note. Her message bears the seal of the Ministry of Propaganda, not the First Protector. It says:

THE MINISTRY WOULD LIKE TO REMIND ANTIGONE SUR AELA OF THE INTENSELY PUBLIC NATURE OF THE OBLIGATIONS OF RIDERS OF THE FOURTH ORDER, AND TO URGE HER TO CONSIDER CAREFULLY WHETHER SHE BELIEVES HER VOWS TO SERVE THE STATE WOULD BE BEST HONORED BY PURSUING SUCH A PUBLIC ROLE.

They want her to throw the match.

Beside me, Annie has finished putting on her flamesuit. Black leather, treated for heat and fire, hugs her slender frame from neckline to ankles, her braided hair a burst of red above the suit's dark silhouette. She makes no attempt to discuss the note, not while others are still around us, and so we finish arming in silence, strapping plates of armor, forged out of repurposed dragons' scales, over our flamesuits, and tightening them one by

one. After the last riders have headed out and we're alone in the armory, Annie takes back her note.

"What did yours say?" she asks.

Atreus's note is the last thing I want to show her. I hesitate.

"Please," she says quietly.

Without waiting for my answer, she takes my note from the cubby. After reading it, she sinks down onto the bench beside me.

"Congratulations," she says.

She doesn't sound bitter, or even jealous—just tired.

"You're the peasant they want," she adds.

Peasant was one of the words banned after the Revolution, except in historical context. I don't think I've ever heard Annie say it. Not in reference to herself.

Nor in reference to me, though it's been my official identity for as long as she's known me. It is an omission on her part that I've been conscious of since the orphanage, when I was less skilled at hiding where I came from, and that she's only ever since acknowledged with certain silences.

I speak through a rising discomfort. "That's not how—Atreus would never think of it like that—"

Annie's head is tilted back as she studies the ceiling. "Atreus would. He needs riders in the Fourth Order who pass muster with the elites."

The Fourth Order will be the rank given to the four riders who win today, signaling that of the thirty-two riders in the corps, they are the four most skilled. It's the highest ranking in the fleet below Firstrider.

"You're talking about—"

"I'm talking about succession."

I freeze on the word; Annie sounds short of breath to utter it aloud.

Before he ends his stewardship of the new regime, Atreus's successor will be chosen from among the best and the brightest of the Guardians. The next Protector. All but officially, that selection pool will be made up of the Fourth Order.

"He's thinking about succession," Annie repeats, "and he needs peasants who don't still—act like it."

I speak through gritted teeth as I yank the straps of an arm guard tighter on my forearm. "You don't *act like it*."

Annie lets out a faint laugh. We both know I'm lying. I can guess as well as she what the ministry probably has on file: that Annie is known for being too deferential, too reserved, for having trouble with situations that require public speaking. She's been at the top of the class for as long as I can remember but almost never raises her hand.

She could train past that. She could find the confidence if she tried and had the resources. But how is she supposed to look for that, to think she even *should* look for that, if the ministry sends her letters like this?

Something else, then. Something that has nothing to do with the ministry.

"You said you had family coming today?"

I ask the question gingerly, unsure whether I should ask it at all. Annie blinks, then shakes her head. "Not family. Friends . . . from my village."

My village are two more words Annie usually avoids saying. She enunciates them carefully, as if they're foreign.

"They wrote," she goes on. "A letter. Not from the parents—they don't read." I risk a quick glance at her; her face begins

to redden at *read*. “But their son’s been in school since the Revolution, so he wrote. That they’d be coming. They were the family who I was with for a bit before Albans.”

Albans was our orphanage. She hasn’t mentioned her circumstances before it, at least in front of me, in years.

She fiddles with her hair, pushing a few strands out of her eyes and behind her ear. “I haven’t seen them since—” She looks up and I realize I’m staring at her; I look away and she does, too, seizing her boots, jamming one foot after another into them.

“I bet your making Fourth Order would mean a lot to them,” I tell her. “It would probably mean a lot to anyone coming in from the countryside to watch the tournament. You’d be—”

Still bent over her boots, Annie prompts me softly.

“I’d be what?”

I hear myself say it. Words that would have shamed my father to hear said by anyone, let alone by me.

“You’d be making history.”

Annie has reached for her helmet, the other gloved hand braced on her knees, about to push to her feet. There’s a strange curve to her smile, a lift to her eyebrows, as she looks at me. When she speaks, she doesn’t counter that I would, according to the lowborn identity I’ve assumed, be making history, too.

As if she knows I’m not. As if she knows that I am simply hoping, desperately, hungrily, to repeat it.

“Let’s go, Lee.”