

## Epics of Isavoire

### Hidden Excerpt: Full of Pride

The Virtuous Adara Clarent was enjoying her travels, having been sent on her mission to the principality of Valiance.

In truth, the mission to go there intimidated her. She had only just achieved the Virtuous title and this was only her fourth outing since becoming a Guardian of some rank. The world below Heofonia was so vast, so varied, she had so much to learn, but no clue where to begin.

Eventually, though, she managed to land someplace that seemed nice. It was a small area, due east of Ahsira, not plotted on any map. Her path to Valiance was due south, while the trip would take another day even with flight. As a result, she needed some place to rest herself for the next day and perhaps pick up supplies.

Soon, the green-eyed woman landed on the rich soil, smiling as she got a chance to interact with the surface people. Part of her envied the Guardians who got to be around them full-time, especially the ones who worked with royalty. She wasn't sure she could do it, but she had been told that her calling was elsewhere anyway.

Soon, she walked into a small village. There weren't many people walking about, but there was such a mixture. Humans, Flor, Golems, Ellons, even Wynverians who were flying as dragons! It made her excited to see all the kinds of people she had read about. Before now, all her outings were direct trips to principalities or Heofonite posts.

She stared, emerald green eyes wide with wonder. A few stopped and stared at the gray winged one, her white clothes and polished chainmail making her stand out, with only a few daring to stare directly at her freckled face. Her zoning out was interrupted, though, by the of speech.

“Spare change for the poor? Spare change?”

Adara turned to look and saw that the person was a young girl, no older than eleven. She had black hair and almost tanned skin, but her eyes were closed. The red haired Heofonite also noticed a walking stick and a small bowl, with a few coins of foreign make in them.

"I'm sorry, young lady, but are you alright?"

"As alright as I can be. Just a little hungry is all." The young woman did her best to move the bowl out of sight.

"Poor dear, allow me to help you. Come with me!" Adara began to reach into a bag she carried with her before bringing out a loaf of soft, baked bread. "Here, this should be good."

The young girl could feel the loaf placed in her hand before eating it, smiling slightly. "It's very good, thank you, miss!"

"It's no problem, little one. My name is Adara Clarent, the Virtuous." The winged woman brimmed with pride as she spoke to the young woman, not even masking her air of satisfaction.

"That's a fancy name," the young girl said in wonder after taking a second, big bite. It almost looked as if the girl was trying to swallow the bread whole.

"Thank you. It's a title where I come from. I'm part of a uh...Certain protection force," Adara said proudly, placing a hand on her hip. "It's my job to help people when I can."

"It's still good of you either way, miss."

"No problem at all, miss...?"

"Petra," the young girl said before finishing the last piece of bread. "Well, could you maybe help me one more time?"

"Sure, name what you need and I'll try to provide," the Heofonite offered confidently.

"I need a place to stay. I know it is a lot to ask, but this town has nowhere for me to stay, and..." Slowly, Petra opened her eyes to reveal the cloudy, gray irises she possessed. "I can't find my way around."

Adara couldn't help but pity the young woman; Placing her hand on Petra's, she smiled. "I promise, while I'm here I'll give you everything you need."

The young girl giggled happily. "Thank you, I'm really glad to hear that."

"No problem. I'll just need you to come with me while I go on some errands." The Heofonite folded her wings so she'd be more comfortable and less obtrusive as she and Petra walked. Adara was busy sight seeing, while Petra followed behind closely. The more she looked around, the more excitement she felt as she observed the foreign culture. "Wow, this place is still amazing. There are so many different people!"

"I take it you've lived a sheltered life?" Petra asked curiously, moving her cane as she walked. So long as she didn't detect objects with the cane, she proceeded normally.

Adara paused; She had never really considered herself sheltered, yet it was true she had not even spoken to a non-Heofonite until she got her promotion earlier that year, and she was nearly twenty-four. Growing self-conscious, she nodded before replying reluctantly. "I suppose I have, but I want to change that!"

"Really?" Petra asked, surprised.

"Yes, I want to help everyone else, it's my duty as a Guardian," she said with determination and pride, her chest puffed out a little. Just then, Adara noticed a shop. "Here, let me collect my supplies. I'll be back. Please stay here."

Petra nodded before smiling widely, sincere happiness on her face. "I promise, miss Adara."

Adara couldn't help but feel happier; she was finally helping someone, fulfilling her duty as a Heofonite Guardian. She made a mental note to buy extra food for Petra to make sure the poor child didn't go hungry..

After half an hour, Adara exited the store, glad to have her supplies and a bit of attention. A few of the patrons and clerks at the store had taken interest in the strange being with wings. Adara was only barely

able to keep from basking in how unique they found her. "Petra? I got us food, and I even-" Adara stopped when she noticed that Petra was nowhere in sight. She looked around, confused at first but did not see the young woman. When it took her more than ten minutes to find Petra, she began to feel worry well up in the pit of her stomach. "Maybe I tarried inside too long." Flying upwards quickly, she looked around frantically, trying to see if she could locate her from above. She did see Petra, this time cornered by two strangers who approached menacingly.

Flying down to a nearby rooftop and landing almost soundlessly, she began to observe what was going on.

"We saw that winged girl give you some money, child, how about you hand us some?" asked a tall, muscular man with rust brown hair.

"We'll leave you some. After all, we wouldn't steal everything from a blind kid...Just most things." A Flor with a rose for his flower smirked, showing his white teeth as he held out his hand.

"Both of you should leave if you know what's good for you," Petra said calmly and with authority, holding her cane in a firm manner.

"Aw, is the blind brat gonna put up a fight, Gharren?" The Flor asked the musclebound man.

"Not much against a Wynverian, Meht."

"I would, you fiends!" Adara shouted angrily, raising her voice as she descended. "Leave her now or be vanquished."

"Oh? So the girl thinks she's a hero," Gharren chuckled. "Fine, fine, I wouldn't want to anger the oh-so-scary intruder..."

"Right," Meht agreed before staring at Petra darkly. "Be glad that doves over there saved you..."

Quickly, both Meht and Gharren left, while Petra waited for Adara.

“Are you all right?” Adara asked hastily as she rushed to Petra’s side.

“Yes. I am glad you arrived, otherwise things might have been troublesome.”

“Just doing my duty. I can’t believe the ground has such rabble on it. In Heofonia no one would dream of robbing anyone else.”

“Things are different here, that’s true,” Petra admitted sadly. “It’d be nice if they had someone competent to guide them.”

“I suppose, but they have to make their own choices. All we can do is lead by example.” Adara then placed a hand on Petra’s shoulder. “I think it’s time we found someplace to rest. It doesn’t seem too safe on these streets, sadly.”

“All right. Where would be safe?” Petra asked curiously.

Adara paused. She had no clue where to go. She didn’t see an inn anywhere and she did not know her way around. Feeling sheepish, she looked at Petra. “I honestly don’t know...I’m sorry...”

Petra sighed. “It is okay. You really can’t be expected to know if you haven’t really learned or experienced things...”

Adara was quiet. Part of her wanted to correct her new acquaintance, but she felt Petra’s words were right. She knew nothing of this town, its people, or even about how things worked there. She knew geography and history, but nothing about the world outside. She felt naïve, but she still felt a desire to help... “I apologize.”

“It isn’t your fault,” Petra said in a consoling, almost patronizing tone. “Your intentions are good, but I feel ignorance is common for most Heofonites.”

“No need to beat me over the head about...” Adara suddenly stopped, feeling as if something was off. Petra, the way she spoke had a certain maturity about it and a tone of voice that felt wrong for a child. A

chill went up her spine as she stopped looking at Petra as someone to be pitied and sheltered and saw her for herself. "Petra, who are you really?"

"Hm?" Petra turned in Adara's general direction, facing slightly to the side of her.

"Your entire attitude shifted quite a bit. It's one thing to talk about me, but then you go on to lambast my kinsmen. You seem more concerned with that than your safety, and the way you spoke to those two rabble-rousers implied you had no fear at all."

"And you're saying I can't care about people or be brave?"

"I'm saying I don't buy that you are." Adara stepped closer, casting a shadow over Petra as she looked down over her. "I'll ask again, who are you really?"

Petra's expression did not change for a few moments, nor did she move. She was still as a statue, until slowly, she smiled and faced Adara. Her teeth shifted slightly, becoming more sharp. "I've grown weary of indulging your ego, child..."

Adara glared at Petra, staring her in the eye despite shaking with fear. As Adara held her glance, resisting the urge to step back, that was when something odd happened. Petra's eyes began to slowly lose the film over them. They became less cloudy and gained a yellow, almost gleaming golden color, while her corneas became more serpentine and sharp.

The Heofonite tried to break eye contact, but couldn't. She felt transfixed, unable to even blink before her head swam and all became hazy, distorting wildly. Soon, Adara lost any sense of feeling in her legs. It wasn't long until the rest of her body became numb, like a coffin of flesh, then she fell unconscious.

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Time passed, presumably hours, when Adara awoke, this time with her weaponry and supplies gone, her armor removed from her. There was only the clothes on her back and a sound of hissing.

“Nggh...Where am I?” Looking around, Adara saw that she was in a strange cavern, the walls lined with odd runes and sigils; The place was certainly magical, which set the Heofonite on edge. She rose, only to feel a pain on her stomach. Lifting her shirt, she noticed that there was a strange, circular brand with a sigil inside. “What is this?”

“A little assurance,” a voice like Petra’s said. This one was even more adult, dripping with confidence despite also sounding cold, calculating. Hungry. “I needed time for your Mark of Disgrace to set in.”

“So that’s what this brand is? Then what does it do, and why have you kidnapped me?”

“Eases my plans...I can’t let you be privy to my every secret...not yet.” The slithering grew louder, until finally a figure showed herself.

The being had long, silver hair and completely yellow eyes that glowed like the sun. The upper body was womanly, but the arms, back, and waist down were covered in scales. Her arms were long and thin, with sharp, bone white nails. Her entire lower body was one long serpent’s tail, while her teeth resembled fangs.

The creature before Adara was five times the size of a normal human, though nothing about her appeared brutish.

“Wh-what are you?!”

“The beginning of your new being,” the voice said soothingly, as if to make a newborn sleep. The tone almost lulled Adara into comfort

“Not on my watch!” Adara raised a hand and a beam of light soon followed, piercing the creature’s shoulder a moment. Adara then tried to fly, before she was struck back by a similar streak of light to her own attack. “Aaagh!”

“Such fight, and you are a light syncralist...It is a shame your land has crippled its people so...like caged doves, unaware of the world outside their little flock.” The serpentine creature’s injured shoulder slowly healed, just as Adara noticed a large snake that appeared to be attached to the creature’s back.

“I’ve had enough of you talking down to me!” Adara tried to create a bigger flash of light, hoping to blind the snake so she could run. The plan worked, as both the snake hissed and the female body covered her eyes. Taking the chance, Adara ran, trying to ignore the pains on her stomach and back.

She managed to get out of sight for a time, but the area was a maze. She created a small light, hoping to navigate a way out, but there were so many tunnels and paths. She eventually chose one, knowing her time was limited, picking the highest most one.

The path was small, cramped, making Adara feel as if she was being swallowed alive as her wings practically scraped against the ceiling above her.. The path closed around her, making movement hard, near impossible...But she had to fight. Part of her wondered how something so big could use a tunnel so small, another part wondered if she’d make it out alive.

As she finally pulled herself out, she managed to rise, finding herself in a dank building, the wooden floors cracked and splintered, the insides reeking of mold. Outside the broken windows, the moon could be seen. All Adara needed was to make it to the door and fly off.

Leaping, she flew for the old, half rotted doorway, when suddenly there was a sharp, piercing pain in her ankle. She shrieked in pain, clutching her leg and falling before she saw a snake had bitten her, then from the ground, attached to the same snake was the monster from before, now sporting a second serpent sprouting from her other shoulder.

“Sorry, I have a bad habit of toying with my food...However, thanks to Petra I am used to walking around blindly.”

“No...you can’t do this! I’m a Heofonite, a Guardian!” She tried to fight desperately, punching the snake’s head and trying to strangle it as she was dragged towards the monster, a feeling of dread enveloping her. She tried to fire more lights, but it also failed, the injuries she produced on the monster being healed within seconds. Whatever seared scales were produced were almost instantaneously shed and replaced with new ones.

The creature chuckled with a dark satisfaction. “Seems losing with grace is also not a virtue of the virtuous, either.”



“You beast! You monster! I won’t die, not like this! Not-“ However, words failed Adara, as she was gazed upon by something deep and disconcerting, its form changing as the creature shifted into a much bigger, much more staggering form. Then, in one motion, she was consumed, swallowed, ingested.

There was blackness, there was wetness, then voices, then nothingness. The winged woman did not know where she was, what was up or down. She couldn’t feel her body, her eyes failed her. There was no blackness anymore, but there was no light either...Then, something began to nudge at her, the insecurities she possessed suddenly felt more pronounced.

Ineptitude, fear, doubt, pride...Pride itself was large, vast, but fear and doubt were all encompassing. It was like a fog, covering her, pervading every bit of what being remained.

Then...There was a path, a light brighter than any she had seen come from the sun. It cut through the fog, made her feel like herself again, holding hope.

The desire to help, to rectify her flaws, they were there...Away, but visible. She could make it, she could escape...She just needed to shed, to let go of all else. Adara...Her name...Was that her name? It faded, as the light was ahead. Grasping without hands, she chased it, not even realizing that soon, she had forgotten what she was chasing after...Or what she was fleeing from.

In the end, she was a consciousness without being, even the pieces that had been her identity were stripped from what remained, a spark with no place to go, chasing after a forgotten idea in an endless void.

Elsewhere, or rather outside of that realm, a body like Adara’s manifested, nude now, though her same body, same wings, same freckled face, and same long, red hair, and even the same emerald green eyes...Yet so much was different. Thankfully, the Mark of Disgrace was intact, solidifying the being’s plans.

The body recalled much, the mind in it could feel the previous occupant’s own thoughts and feelings, just as she had felt those of her follower, those of the young pauper, and others before she discarded them. She felt the last moments of Adara’s fear, and they were delectable. She could feel Adara’s connection to light, and it held promise.

The Pariah now had a “virtuous” body. That rank would serve her well, and perhaps lead to more. Adara’s body was young, but perhaps the birth of a new era required a new leader. Still, she could sense Adara’s disdain for her name and agreed. Instead, she would go by Clarent Laurela while in this body. Heofonites could choose a new name upon becoming a Guardian, her new memories told her, and she would make this identity her own entirely.

Then, in a pit of irony, Pariah felt consumed with Adara’s old fervor for the world. It was a feeling that Pariah also had, wishing to own it for herself and usher in a new age for both the world and Heofonia....