

The Sealed Star

Aurelion: Outlaws of the Mandate — Book I

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Chapter 000

The first deaths were entered in blue ink.

Blue was the color for manageable loss in the health ledgers of Aurelia Prime. A household fever. A transit cough. A dockside infection confined to three linked tenements and one warehouse chapel. Blue meant the dead could be counted by ward clerks before supper and sealed into the morning rolls without troubling the Continuance Office.

By the ninth day, the clerks had no blue ink left.

The fever came through the capital by small permissions. It rode in the sleeve of a tax assessor from the lower granaries. It waited in the wet cloth around a shrine singer's throat. It crossed the silver causeway in the breath of a page who had spent three nights carrying petitions from the outer court to the physicians' stair. At first it was treated as all things were treated in Aurelia: by rank, by district, by stamped authority, by the time at which a gate might be opened.

Then the physicians began to die.

The plague court was assembled in the Hall of Measured Mercy, which had not been used for mercy in two hundred years. Its old name remained because no ministry wished to spend the money required to cut new letters into blackstone. The hall smelled of vinegar steam, scorched copper, seal wax, and tired bodies held too long inside formal clothes.

Seven ministers sat under the suspended Mandate lamps. Below them stood the health officers, the Star Registry advocates, two priors from the inner shrines, and a line of clerks with covered mouths. The lamps had once been clear. Their glass was now yellow with generations of oil smoke.

High Commissioner Brohn Elian stood near the center of the floor because he had arranged it so.

He was a large man, though not in a soldier's way. Court food had softened the edges of him. His hands were beautiful, pale, long-fingered, trained for rings and scrolls and the small violence of pointing to a line that would ruin another man. He had a red formal seal hanging at his breast, bright as fresh blood against the ash-gray robe of emergency service.

The health minister read numbers until numbers stopped being useful. The

lower wards had sealed themselves. Three ferry crews had refused plague transport, and one had been hanged at dawn for it, which did not make the other two crews return. Bodies waited outside crematory gates because the furnace teams had lost too many operators. At the south barracks, two companies of registry guards were burning their own bedding and threatening to shoot anyone who brought new orders.

"The Mandate must be seen to remain whole," said Minister Corven Ilyr.

It was the sort of sentence men used when they had no medicine.

The senior prior bowed. He was old enough that his skin seemed to have been folded rather than grown. "The inner shrines can read the public rites."

"Public rites are not enough."

"Then quarantine must be enough."

"Quarantine has failed in four wards."

"Then Your Excellency is asking the shrines for theatre."

The hall chilled at that. Not because the word was wrong. Because it was accurate and had been spoken where recorders could hear it.

Brohn Elian lifted his head. He had a talent for silence. He let a room want him before he gave it anything.

"There is the old reliquary," he said.

The ministers turned, not all at once. They were practiced men. They did not reveal hunger quickly.

The prior looked at him. "No."

Brohn made his face mild. "No?"

"The Reliquary of Saint Orison is not a plague office."

"It is an archive of Mandate continuity."

"It is a sealed war archive attached to a shrine by later embarrassment."

Minister Ilyr's thin mouth moved by a measure that might have been amusement. "Prior, the city is dying. If the old archive can provide a rite of confirmation, a founding record, a visible assurance, then we will use it."

"Use," the prior said, "is the word that has brought us here."

Brohn stepped forward. "The people need to know the First Mandate has not withdrawn from them."

"The First Mandate was not a weather spirit, Commissioner."

"Tell that to the lower wards."

The prior closed his eyes. His attendants behind him shifted. One of them had a fever flush above his mask.

In the end, the vote was not called a vote. Votes suggested disagreement. The Continuance Office preferred convergence. A travel writ was prepared. A shrine warrant was attached. The Star Registry added a narrow permission to inspect dormant records connected to ancient enhanced lineages, should such records present themselves under seal.

The phrase was absurdly careful.

Dormant records did not present themselves. Men opened doors.

Brohn Elian left Aurelia Prime before dawn with six riders, two physicians, nine guards, a portable seal furnace, and a clerk whose cough had already begun to thicken. The city gates opened for him on emergency authority. Outside the capital, fog lay low on the processional road. The lamps of the quarantine posts burned dull orange in the wet.

At the third post a woman held up a bundle wrapped in gray cloth. The bundle did not move.

"Commissioner," she called.

The lead guard raised his shock stave. "Back from the road."

"He has a body writ," the woman said. "My son. They said the Registry would take him if he lived, and now he is dead, and they will not give him a death stamp."

Brohn kept his gaze forward.

"Commissioner."

The guard struck her across the shoulder, not hard enough to kill, hard enough to put her in the ditch. The bundle rolled from her arms. A small hand came free of the cloth, gray at the nails.

The clerk riding behind Brohn looked once, then wrote nothing.

By midday the capital was hidden behind them. The road climbed through pine districts and old relay ridges where the first emperors had laid signal bones into the ground. Most had gone quiet. Some still hummed under rain. The horses disliked the sound and rolled their eyes when the iron shoes crossed buried lines.

The Reliquary of Saint Orison stood at the edge of a black ravine.

It had been built in three eras and trusted by none of them. The lowest stones belonged to the founding century: huge, unadorned blocks dragged from some dead military platform and set into the mountain like a refusal. Above them rose a later shrine of white mineral glass, graceful once, now cracked by frost. Around that, the late Imperium had fastened galleries, audit rooms, pilgrim rails, and a visitors' court with bronze signs explaining which parts of history were approved for viewing.

The prior-archivist met Brohn at the outer stair.

She was smaller than he expected. Her head was shaved. Her robe was plain black except for a narrow line of silver thread at the hem, the sign of an archive keeper permitted to touch sealed records with bare hands. Her name, according to the travel docket, was Seraun.

"High Commissioner," she said.

Brohn waited for the proper depth of bow. It did not come.

"Prior-Archivist. The capital sends emergency warrant."

"The capital often does."

The clerk unfolded the packet. Rain freckled the top sheet before an attendant raised a cover.

Seraun read slowly. Her lips moved once, not in prayer, perhaps in anger. She touched the Star Registry addendum with one finger.

"This sentence was added by someone who has never stood below the lower door."

"Then you can instruct me when we arrive there."

"You will not arrive there."

Brohn smiled. "There is plague in the capital."

"There is always plague somewhere."

"The Emperor requires confirmation."

"The Emperor requires physicians."

"You speak freely for a woman alone on a mountain."

Seraun looked past him, down the steps, at the guards and physicians and steaming horses. "A woman alone on a mountain is sometimes the last person still doing her assigned work."

The clerk stopped breathing for a moment. Brohn heard it and disliked him for it.

"Open the reliquary," Brohn said.

Seraun turned without another word. The gates behind her were old cedar banded in black iron. No visible mechanism moved. Somewhere inside the mountain, weights shifted. The doors parted with the tired groan of wood that had endured more ceremony than weather.

They passed through halls of sealed banners, cracked tablets, broken command helms, reliquary bones that might have been human or might have been carved from pale machine resin. Brohn knew enough history to recognize some names. Roran Vale appeared on three walls. Avar Drauven on one, though the letters had been half-chiseled away during some later doctrinal correction. Tavian Lume's name appeared not at all, which meant the archive was honest in at least one respect.

Pilgrim galleries ended at the Hall of First Settlement. Beyond it stood a rope.

Seraun stopped there. "The public archive ends."

Brohn lifted his warrant. "Emergency authority continues."

"Authority can continue into a furnace. It still burns."

"Prior."

"High Commissioner."

They stood facing one another while water tapped from the guards' cloaks onto the old stone.

Brohn had built his career on understanding which refusals were sincere and which were performance. Seraun's refusal was sincere. That made it inconvenient, not binding.

"Cut the rope," he said.

No one moved.

He turned his head slightly. "Captain."

The captain of guards had the unhappy face of a man who preferred orders that would be regretted by someone else. He drew his knife and cut the rope.

Below the public hall, the reliquary became colder.

The stairs were not built for pilgrims. They were too steep and too regular, made by military engineers who expected tired men to descend in armor. The

air carried a faint metallic dryness beneath the damp. Twice, Brohn passed sealed side doors marked with old hazard signs whose meanings had fallen out of common use. His clerk whispered one translation: atmospheric failure. Another: memory contamination.

Seraun heard him. "Do not read aloud below this level."

The clerk swallowed and closed his mouth.

At the third landing, something moved across the passage ahead of them.

One guard cursed. Another brought up his lamp.

It was a maintenance child, or looked like one at first: narrow shoulders, bare feet, gray archive tunic. The face was too still. Its eyes reflected the lamp with a pale animal shine.

"You are late," the child said.

Brohn's skin tightened.

Seraun lowered her head. "Archive vessel."

"You are late," it repeated.

Brohn found his voice. "For what?"

The child's gaze moved to the red seal at his breast. "For the door that waits for red authority."

The guards muttered. Brohn forced a small laugh. "An old mechanism with a child's face. Your mountain is theatrical after all."

Seraun said nothing.

The child stepped aside. Its bare feet made no sound on the stone.

They came at last to the lower door.

It was not large. Brohn had expected something grand enough to justify the prior's fear. Instead the door was narrow, black, and almost plain. No saints. No emperors. No Mandate sunburst. Only a square of dark metal set into the center, and on it a line of old script.

The clerk leaned closer before remembering fear.

"Read," Brohn said.

Seraun's face had gone bloodless. "Leave it."

"Read."

The clerk looked at her, then at Brohn. "It says: `When red office comes in

sickness, the sealed star shall answer.'"

No one spoke.

Brohn felt a warmth move through him that was not courage. It was the private heat of a man discovering that chance had chosen the shape of flattery.

Seraun gripped her sleeve. "Old locks were often keyed to prevent officials from standing too near them. A warning can look like an invitation to the vain."

"Or a prophecy can look like a warning to the afraid."

"Commissioner."

He removed the red seal from his breast.

The physician nearest him whispered, "My lord, perhaps the upper archive is enough."

Brohn ignored him. He pressed the seal against the dark square.

For a moment, nothing happened. The guards shifted. Someone coughed. The sound went down the stairwell and came back thinner.

Then the mountain breathed out.

The seal grew hot enough to burn his hand. Brohn cried out and let it go, but it did not fall. It clung to the door as if held from the other side. Red enamel ran down the metal face. The old script brightened, line by line, not with flame but with a cold white pressure that made the eyes ache.

Bolts withdrew inside the wall.

Many bolts.

Too many for a shrine.

Seraun turned and shouted up the stair, "Close the upper gates!"

The lower door opened before anyone could obey.

Black air came through.

It was not smoke, though it moved like smoke. It carried no heat. It smelled of old rain, copper, opened graves, and machine dust. The lamps bent toward it. The clerk dropped his packet and began reciting a childhood prayer under his breath, all formal language gone from him.

Inside the chamber, shelves rose into darkness. Not shelves, Brohn realized. Cradles. Record cradles stacked around a central shaft, each one holding a

sealed cylinder, a broken collar, a strip of preserved tissue, a nameplate turned inward, a child's training token, a soldier's tooth, a pilot's command bead, a prison brand, a marriage lock, a scrap of blood-dark cloth.

The black air moved among them.

One by one, small lights opened.

Thirty-six above.

Seventy-two below.

The numbers came to Brohn without counting. They arrived in him as certainty and made him want to vomit.

The archive vessel stood at the threshold behind them. Its child's face was wet with condensation.

"Recorded," it said.

Seraun struck the emergency plate beside the door. Nothing answered.

The lights lifted from their cradles. Some were white. Some were iron-blue. Some red as fever. They passed through metal, through stone, through the bodies of the guards, through Brohn's chest. He felt each one as a finger touching the inside of his ribs. He saw, or thought he saw, a marsh under fog; a man laughing with blood on his knuckles; a woman calculating water by the smell of mud; a branded instructor walking in snow; a monk tearing roots from the ground; a clerk burning a letter; a blade held up in a market; a child with nine marks across his skin watching his house burn.

Then the lights were gone.

The chamber emptied into ordinary darkness.

One guard was kneeling. One had pissed himself. The clerk had bitten his tongue and was bleeding down his chin. Seraun stood very still, as if any movement would make history worse.

Brohn looked at the open door.

The red seal lay on the floor, split cleanly in half.

"Close it," he said.

No one moved.

He turned to the captain. His voice came out rough. "Close it."

The guards pushed the door shut by hand. It took six of them. The bolts did not return. Seraun watched and said nothing, which frightened Brohn more

than if she had cursed him.

Back in the public hall, rain struck the high mineral glass. The sound was gentle, almost domestic.

Brohn washed his burned palm in a basin meant for ritual purification. The water turned pink where the skin had opened. His clerk gathered the packets with shaking hands.

"The capital will receive," Brohn said, "confirmation that the reliquary remains sealed and that the rites of continuity may proceed."

Seraun looked at him. "You think a record can be made false because a man has ordered it."

"I know records."

"You know offices."

He wrapped his hand. "You will countersign."

"No."

"Prior-Archivist, do not mistake a mountain for protection."

"Do not mistake a lie for a lock."

He left her there.

On the ride down, the fevered clerk fell from his horse and did not rise. Brohn ordered the body burned at the next post with the contaminated travel cloths. The man had written three drafts of the return report before dying. Brohn kept the cleanest one.

The report reached Aurelia Prime two days before Brohn did. By then the plague had begun to slow, as plagues sometimes did, for reasons no court could claim honestly and therefore every court claimed at once. The inner shrines sang. The Mandate lamps were cleaned. The lower wards received grain and instructions in the same carts.

High Commissioner Brohn Elian was praised for courage.

The sealed vault was not mentioned.

Far from the capital, in a provincial barracks, a training brand woke under a young man's skin and burned like a remembered name.

In a mountain priory, an old relay root hummed for the first time in generations.

In the Mournwater Basin, where fog sat low over the broken reeds, a ferryman

found one hundred and eight dead silver fish floating belly-up beside the old gantry gate. He counted them twice, because he was a practical man and did not like omens that came without numbers.

Then he carried the fish inside and salted them.

People had to eat.

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