

# THE WHITE WALLS

A SHORT STORY IN THE ANCIENT  
VESTIGES SERIES

BY  
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Rachel raised her glass, joining the toast at the long table.

She looked to her old friend, Lutessa, who beamed back a wide smile. There were other priestesses, scholars, and stewards at the table. They each said short speeches of congratulation, and Rachel knew there were many more, and she was surprised the red wine had not gone to her head.

The *Unwavering Prophet* was filled to the brink; and the servants scurried around from table to table, removing wine bottles and replacing them with bottles of red and white wine, of all vintages and ages, she was sure. There were some plates stacked up, and others with half eaten roasted chicken. If Rachel's table was indicative of the others, she did not think there was much that they ate.

"Rachel, hey!"

Rachel turned her head to the sound of the voice. Most of the table looked towards her, and the speaker – Annabel, a pudgy brunette, and by her tones, the woman was not doing herself any favours this night – she smiled slightly and said, "Leave them be girl." She pointed wildly to the other tables. "Truftan Monastery was our home. Spread a little cheer to us. You always kept to yourself, but not this night!"

Smiling, Rachel knew there was truth to that. When she was old enough to know what it meant, she was alone, and that meant putting up walls. Often she lost herself in study, and though the scholars spoke her praises, they were concerned that she would be lost in books until she met the warm embrace of Mother God.

Then Lutessa came into her life.

Rachel looked to her oldest friend; she was still smiling, her cheeks reddened, and she inclined her head. Rachel drained her glass and said, "Forgiveness, my sisters – for you are that, as any who e'er was, blessed by Mother God. So much has come to pass, I cannot rightly believe that we have all finished this journey, and for mine and Lutessa's work to be exalted no less."

"The book worm cannot rightly believe it!" Jess shouted; she was a tall, ungainly girl of nineteen seasons. Rachel did not know much about her, but her presence was hard to miss. "I can remember the years before study, you always snuck into the libraries, and whatever chastisements of 'play, play!' the scholars shouted at you, it never did deter you. Not that your friend was much different." Giggles broke out across the table. "You are the best of us, make no doubt. Your work deserves exalting. What did those old codgers say?"

"Oh, do let me do the voice!" Annabel proclaimed. No one offered a word of disagreement, waiting for her to begin. She did so, and Rachel thought she sounded old and baritone. "The work is unusual, if I do say so, but a worthwhile insight into the men and women who bring the word of Mother God – a perpetual reminder that we who follow in Her name are but humble servants, flawed, but capable of great deeds."

The girls around the table applauded, and Lutessa put a hand on Rachel's shoulder, smiling. She could not help but smile herself. The work – *The Guile of Disciples* – was her prized labour of many long years into the lives of Luke and Savannah; and not their works under the light of Mother God, but who they were, as people, making their way through troubled times in a war-torn realm.

*What I shall never tell them, Rachel thought, is I wanted to do that, on account that I needed it. Lutessa, too, or I do not read her rightly. We who were abandoned and disregarded. The Light of Mother God was never enough. Not when the imperator wages war wantonly. We are all frail and fragile; we must see to ourselves first, before we seek Her Light.*

"'Tis a worthy work," Lutessa said, turning her eyes

towards the group. "Surely you all will do the same in the days to come. If I was not sleepy-headed during the ceremony, Annabel, you were elected as a scholar, were you not? Patricia, Heather, Lilly, you as well, no?"

"We shall all be drunken bookworms together!" Heather cried out. She was stout and round with short cropped brown hair. "Will that not be a lark to the first scholar?"

"My surrogate mother shall not approve." Lutessa chastised, though she smiled broadly all the same. "You would do well not to forget that, else we may not remain in the clergy overlong."

The table erupted into giggles once more. A lanky manservant came, refilled their glasses, and Rachel took the opportunity to toast, once it was just them again. "To the girls I am proud to call sisters, to what we achieved, and what we will achieve ever more!"

"Hear, hear!" Jess shouted. "Do stay out of your cocoon this time, dear Rachel."

Rachel pointed at the girl with her left index finger, though she thought her smile gave too much away. "I have been left in there far too long. I have never had greater friends. Blessed be your lives under the Light of Mother God!"

The merriment went on for hours. Rachel said little else, nursing her wine, ever careful not to drift too far into drunkenness. She felt Lutessa's eyes upon her often, appraising, concerned, but never chastising. *I will not hide much from her – I never could.*

The wine stopped flowing, the tables in the *Unwavering Prophet* emptied, and the girls said their good-nights and farewells on the streets of Dale.

The pale moonlight flittered from above, and the streets were empty. Lutessa stood beside Rachel, never missing a step. *She drank more than I did. I am surprised she has so much calm and balance.* Rachel tried to keep her eyes forward, watching her steps on the cobbled roads, lit faintly by the evening lanterns.

"Will you share with me what is on your mind?"

Lutessa asked.

"I never could hide aught from you, could I?" Rachel looked to her friend, and Lutessa's face was full of knowing. Rachel decided to come out with it. "It is this past war. I know the history of the Faith as much as you. Whether it be Trecht or Isilia, we have had no shortage of foes or interest in our green, fertile lands. Once more the knights dispatched the imperium, and I do not doubt they will lick their wounds for some time, but I fear it is not over."

Lutessa raised an eyebrow, and though the night shaded most of her face, it was clear she was surprised. "I have never known you to resort to guesswork, Rachel, nor give into unfounded fears. Certainly, they will return, but not for some time. You must know this."

Rachel shook her head. She could not explain it, not even to Lutessa, but this *was* different. "Why else would Ser Jacob Merlen not pursue the Isilians into their homeland? The knights could hammer out peace and subjugation. End the Isilian threat."

"You think you know more than the knights?" Lutessa asked, smiling. "Likely it is the same as it was before. You read the history just as I have. You *surely* recall why we have never once struck back a foe left our lands?"

Rachel nodded absently, inviting Lutessa to continue.

"If the Voice gave consent to such a course, it would leave us exposed to the Trechtians to the north. The heralds have not spoken of King Marcus in some time. I worry for what he will do, and likely the knights do as well. We cannot forget the rumours of the reavers, either. Trials may lie ahead of us, dear Rachel, but it is on account of our other foes, not the Isilians."

Rachel had considered that, but dismissed it summarily. *If it were true, the king would have sailed east, conquering Isilia whilst the imperium was distracted. If it was those reavers that we heard tales about, what better time than the three years past.* "No," she had finally said to Lutessa. It came out flat. "I am not ignorant of history, no more than you are. There is aught else that is remiss, if only I

could figure out what..."

"What do you suspect?"

Rachel thought the words were said so calmly, so serenely. She knew her friend would not believe a word that she would say in reply, but a willing ear would be a comfort. "It could be several things, Lu. For instance, wait—" Rachel stopped suddenly, and pointed to the Cathedral of Light in the distance. Its white walls shone, even in the evening gloom, its gilded steeples palpable. Lutessa looked on, like some eager pupil. "What do you see, Lu?"

Lutessa giggled. "Is this some trick question, Rachel? I see the bastion of Light itself, blessed by the wisdom of Mother God—our Light in the dark. What do you see?"

*Lu will not believe a word of this.* "I see three hundred years of labyrinths wound up in marble and white stone. I see secrets and trysts of women with power. I see a burden that none of us can rightly understand."

Lutessa shrugged her shoulders and sighed. "Rachel, for near three hundred years the faithful have been persecuted—by the old Marcanas kings, and the succession of imperators. If it were not for the exploits of Justine the Indomitable, these walls would not stand. If there are any secrets and trysts, it is in treachery and betrayal of emissaries that have come to the White Walls, not in those who serve it faithfully."

"The Voice is hiding something—it is why Trecht and Isilia keep coming back."

"Naught is hidden, Rachel. It is our land they want. They always have."

Rachel looked her friend in the eyes, and she saw conviction and resolve. "It is more than that."

Lutessa roped her in for an embrace, and Rachel held her close. "Rachel, seek out the Light. Pray. You will have an answer, then. I shall leave the door open. Your soul needs guidance."

Rachel simply watched Lutessa walk away down the empty street, east, towards apartments the Faith had made ready for them. Rachel did not avert her eyes until

the she felt terribly alone, and then made for the Cathedral of Light.

She walked the side streets, avoiding the market squares. There was some joviality and raucous clamour in the distance, though she ignored it. Nearing the cathedral, there were a few knights with one fist against their breast, their other hand clasped about her sword. She could not tell if they regarded her, but she knew they would not care about her, if she did not start trouble. The knight at the door merely nodded his head, and signaled her into the cathedral.

Rachel walked upon the wide marble floors, looking ahead to the Hall of Prayer in the distance, past the long bridge that nestled over the upper floors of the libraries. Robes shuffled to and fro, and a few whispers echoed off the walls, though at the end of the hall was empty, save for the sculpture of Mother God—her wings stretching endlessly, looking down upon the children—and Rachel felt a warmth of light surge through her as she knelt, closed her eyes, and prayed.

*Mother God. When I was but a child, you gave me succor when I had none. I do not recall much of my mother, and of my father, I have no memory. Your servants offered me salvation, guidance. I may be an orphan, but they were my family, and those girls who I dined with tonight, and Lutessa, her especially.*

*Yet I cannot seem to follow blindly as I used to. I do not reject your succor—no my faith has never wavered in you—but I cannot escape these feelings, these premonitions, that those who serve your will do so as liars. Thieves, I fear, knock upon our doors, and though your holy knights repel them and their kind, they are never truly ended, and the cycle continues. Do the knights and wizened priests, do they know that time is short? Does the high priestess know? Do they delay the inevitable?*

*The more I read, Mother God, the more nervous I become, and the more I want to ask questions that none wish to answer. We, your children, are we fated to thrash vainly in this mire? Do we wait for your guidance? Will it come. I fear there is so little strength left in the faithful. When Isilia comes—or*

*perhaps Trecht or the reavers – will it be our last? Will you send us a Voice that shall lead us out from this darkness? Or, is the Time of Ascendance inevitable?*

*I want to believe as Lutessa does. Faith, my faith, it is not enough. Deliver unto me a sign, I beg! I beg! I must know. I want to act.*

Rachel opened her eyes. The sculpture of Mother God looked down upon her. She felt naked and judged. The warmth was still upon her, but if there was a sign –

A shadow seemed to pass by her left eye, and she heard the distant patter of feet. Looking to the far left of the hall, she saw a door that lead to a stair. *A steward should stand vigil there.* She hurried off and ascended the stair.

The steps seem to creak with every step. She heard no sound but her footfalls, though the questions in her mind raged, and she hoped this was the sign she begged for.

The Hall of Faith opened before her. Rachel looked to the left, and the immense doors to the Chamber of Judgment were shut, though no knights stood at guard. She looked to the walls, and the torches burned as if they were just lit. Instinctively, she walked the hall to the right, and ascended the western stairs to the solars of the Voice and her counsels.

*If I have erred in this, they will send me back to the monastery and –*

She heard the faint whisper of voices coming from above, though she could not puzzle out the words. Hurrying her steps, she reached the upper hall. The whispers were louder, but she saw no knights, not even outside the chamber doors. *Something is wrong.*

With each careful step, the voices became louder and clearer. Rachel stopped at a near door. It was slightly ajar, and the voices were clear. She could not see much, but one voice was the calm and serene voice that had to belong to High Priestess Gloria. Whilst the other was quick and slithering. Rachel was sure she had not heard the voice before. She leaned against the wall, ear towards the opening, and listened.

“Did you not command Ser Jacob to sail east, towards

the waste?" the slithering voice asked with annoyance. "I thought it was the Voice who rules in Dalia, not the knight-commander."

"How little of affairs you truly understand," the Voice replied sharply. "I do command the Faith Templar, but they are dwarfed by the Order of Light. Lord Protector Ser Johnathan Falenir agreed with the knight-commander. I was in no position to gainsay them."

"You accepted their foolishness willingly, then?"

"Privily? No. I did all that I could to make them see sense. They would not. What could I have done?"

"Assemble the clergy and made it public?"

"Public? Public?" the Voice bristled. "We have fought the imperium for three years. Every day I walk through the streets of my city and see families in mourning. Sons and daughters did not return home. They do not wish for war any longer. It would only have strengthened the knight-commander's position."

"You know what they are after, what they seek," the slithering voice said. "My attention must be elsewhere. I cannot ward you from what will come. Emperor Argath is defeated for the nonce, but do not think that King Marcus will leave you alone. Then there is another..."

"What do you *know*, Amos? What have you not told me?"

"These *reavers* as you call them, they are more than smugglers and pirates. This Damian Dannars has called all the cutthroats to his banner. He has played the imperium, the kingdom, and even you, High Priestess Gloria. Whether he will appear before the king, I know not, but Trecht *knows* about *Gabriel's Gift*—from these reaver's lips, no less!"

Rachel swallowed hard. She had read about *Gabriel's Gift* before, though most scholars dismissed it as myth and fantasy. It was purportedly in the possession of Justine the Indomitable, and gave unto her the strength of Mother God. *Is that why they keep coming? To retrieve—*

"It will do the king no good," the Voice insisted. "For all your gifts, even you do not know where it rests. I

guard its secrecy, as all those who came before me have. Even if these madmen burned Dale to the ground, they would not find it."

"Is that what you want?" Amos asked, clearly annoyed. "Have I wasted my time with you and yours? The blood of the Faith gave birth to Lord Kaldred, and for that your flock shall be spared to witness the Time of Ascendance, but not if those armoured fools cannot be tempered."

"Do not threaten me, Amos? You would not escape the city alive if you turned your cloak."

"'Tis you that have betrayed me, High Priestess Gloria. Too long has this struggle gone on. Far too many years of agony and misery. If you would not be made tractable, I shall find a worthy vessel to supplant you."

"You will leave my presence at once, Amos," the Voice shouted. "Flee to your master and tell him that we must have further discussions upon our agreement."

"You are a fool, Gloria," Amos said, laughing. "If only you knew what Lord Kaldred had wrought."

"Put that away, Amos."

"Are you frightened, Gloria? What liars you faithful are. I thought this is what you always aspired towards."

"Amos, no I—"

Speech lead to gurgling, and the tearing of flesh. Rachel did not know what to do or think. *The Voice, did he just...* Without thinking, she burst into the solar. High Priestess Gloria's robes were tainted the crimson of blood, as she lay upon the floor, her fingers limp. Amos wore robes of dark teak, and his black hair fell down his back. He smiled wickedly at her. Rachel looked to the knife in his hand, soaked in blood from hilt to tip. She started to back away in a panic, realizing she had no steel to defend yourself.

"Now, now, you must remain," Amos said.

For reasons she did not understand, she stayed still. She feared for her life as this man walked forward. He cupped her head in his hands, looked deep into her eyes. She felt violated.

“Rachel Du’vron.” She felt a chill shoot down her spine as he said the words, as if his very speech was venom. “The pragmatic scholar. I have been watching you for longer than you know. Much longer. Although, I must admit, I have more of an interest in your friend. You two *are* inseparable. Ever since you met in Truftan Monastery.

*Lutessa!* Rachel willed her body forth, but her muscles would not respond. The creature smiled back wickedly.

“Oh how concerned you are for her.” Amos cackled. “You do misunderstand me. I have no intention of spilling your life’s blood.”

Amos turned his back to Rachel, and walked to the Voice’s desk. As he did so, she could move again, but she could not – would not, flee. “Who-who are you? Why did you do this?”

“You heard it all and still you ask that question?” Amos stepped over the corpse of the Voice and looked out the window, into the darkness of the night. “The realm is changing, Rachel Du’vron. An end is near. It will not come for years, but it is not a far-off spectre. Myth and legend will become as real as the robes you wear. Strong women are needed to lead into this future. ‘Tis why you live.”

Rachel did not know what that meant. Any of it. The knowledge that secrets and trysts were held within the walls did not comfort her. “And Amos, who are you?”

Amos turned and faced her. His eyes were dead shot. “A man who has seen too much, and lost more than I should have. An observer upon the stage. Will you not play your part?”

Rachel felt naught but anger and frustration. *None of it makes sense it –*

She collapsed to the floor suddenly, her head searing with pain, and a screaming voice echoed inside her skull. “Make it stop! Make it stop Amos!”

“Look upon me!”

Rachel looked up, hard as it was. Amos’ hair billowed, as if a wind tore through the solar, and he still grinned

maniacally. She saw a black nimbus surround him, and a faint blue glow that seemed suffused his figure. No account, no interpretation she ever read accounted for what she saw.

"Though you are young, dear Rachel, you have been chosen. Lutessa has been chosen. Serve *It* well and be rewarded. Think yourself greater, and —" Amos laughed and pointed to the corpse of the Voice. "There are always those who serve."

The blood and the lifelessness filled Rachel with dread. In an instant she saw Lutessa — not Gloria — coated in a crimson. It was too much. The voice. The visage. The terror. "Release me!"

"Serve!" Amos said, though it sounded like a thousand voices at once. "Serve and —"

"Rise. If you want to serve, you must rise."

Rachel looked up at Lutessa. She was dressed in her white robes of the Faith. Rachel rubbed her eyes and looked around. She was in her squat apartment in the eastern residential district. "How did I... come here, Lu?"

Lutessa chuckled, and her long brown hair waved to and fro. "You had far too much wine last night, Rachel. So did I, but you came home much later. I dozed off, but when you came through the door an hour later, I woke up. You stumbled about. I helped you into bed. Seems like you needed some extra hours, but the faith awaits no woman."

Rachel breathed deep, looked past the drapes to the city of Dale, bathed in the mid-morning light. *Did I... dream it all? The Voice, Amos, that voice roaring in my head? It seemed so real, it —* "The Voice?" she asked inexplicably. "Is she..."

"In the Cathedral of Light, doubtless, awaiting us — us and the others. Come. You can eat after the ceremony. Get dressed. The Faith awaits no woman!"

Lutessa left, and Rachel withdrew smallclothes and a folded white robe from the dresser. All her life she wanted to put on those white robes, but it felt wrong to her, somehow. *If that dream is real...*

She walked the streets of Dale with Lutessa, Annabel, Patricia, Heather, and Lilly. Rachel said very little while walking the cobbled streets. The markets were busy with trading and bartering. Children scurried off towards the smaller churches, though some clung to their mother's skirts protesting another day. When the Cathedral of Light came into view, knights stood all along the walkway, and at the oaken doors, a score of Faith Templar stood at guard, faceless and emotionless.

Inside priests and priestesses hurried along the marble floor, past the fluted pillars, and towards the Hall of Prayer. Rachel followed as Lutessa lead her around the side and onto the central dais. Rachel looked up at the sculpture of Mother God. She still looked down sternly, and Rachel felt hollow and afraid.

Looking out to the crowd, she saw the faces of the clergy sitting along the hundreds of pews. Some yawned, though most sat attentively. One or two had fallen asleep, though they seemed to be older in years.

Time passed intermittently. Lutessa tried to share whispered words, but Rachel shook her head. She wanted this to be over. That did not stop the others from chattering away. They spoke of the ascension ceremony, accepting the blessing of Mother God, and one or two spoke uncouthly about a couple of handsome young priests.

The whispers were silenced as the first scholar arrived. Anastasia was short, comely, and her long auburn hair was turning grey. Rachel knew that she was Lutessa's surrogate mother. *In a way she was mine too. I have never known a stouter friend.*

"Brothers and sisters," Anastasia declared at the dais. Rachel thought there was a sadness in her voice. "Today, the Voice was to give blessing to these sons and daughters who have become mothers and fathers to Her most holy flock. They have laboured long in their youth, and now are called to serve Mother God's children. It will be a hard life, but they have accepted it.

"High Priestess Gloria knew this too. All too well.

These sons and daughters will still become mothers and daughters, though the ascension ceremony will not take place today.”

The assembled chattered frantically. Anastasia shouted, trying to calm them down, but to no avail. Lutessa squeezed Rachel’s hand and whispered, “What does *that* mean?”

Rachel looked at every face, youthful and aged. She thought they knew it too, though the words had yet to come.

Rachel said the words as Anastasia did.

“High Priestess Gloria, Voice of Mother God, is dead.”