



GRIMDARK FUTURE

CALL TO AID



SHORT STORY

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The broadcast was little more than a ghost through static.

"...help... trail scribes... caught in battle... requesting evac..."

The words dissolved into a white noise that filled the command chamber of the ship. Constance leaned closer to the receiver.

For a flicker of a moment, an image bled through: A handful of trail scribes huddled over the transmitter, eyes wide with desperation. Then the screen went black.

"I know them," Constance said. "Fellow trail scribes. Good people. If they're alive down there, we have to help them."

Constance's hand lingered on the astrolabe. A hush spread through the hold, the kind that would follow the ending of a prayer. The muscles in her jaw tightened.

Across the hall, Fiona folded her arms. She still went by her civilian name, but none could doubt her knowledge of the convent's precepts.

"Even if they're still alive," Fiona said. "Our orders were clear. Refugees from Tyre IV are waiting for us. Every moment we delay risks their safety. We cannot chase a broken signal."

Constance rose to her full height, the rails above humming as the ship angled its descent. The faint glow from her astrolabe reflected against her face, a gleam of starlight inside the ship.

"We cannot abandon the spirit of our service for the letter of our duties," Constance said. "We go to those who need our aid, regardless of whether they are on the schedule."

"Constance." Fiona's brow furrowed. "Our duty is to aid the refugees of Tyre IV. Even if you know these people, it should be possible to log the signal and have someone else get them later..."

"No." Constance placed a gauntleted hand on her table. "Their situation is severe enough that we cannot delay. Our duty is to answer pleas for aid, not note them down for someone else."

With that, the crew began a change of course, heading to the source of the signal on the planet below. Thrusters roared; the hull rattled until the overhead rails sang like struck wires.

Soon, a low shudder ran through the deck as the ship plunged down into the world's lower atmosphere.

Through the forward screens, the battlefield revealed itself in fragments: roads shredded by artillery fire, homes and stores left as burnt-out shells, or little more than piles of concrete and rebar.

A Sister near the bulkhead muttered a prayer to the God-Queen.

As the ship touched down, HDF Veterans hurried to the door to greet them. The soldiers' weapons were shouldered; it was a formal welcome party, rather than a hostile one. Still, the HDF Veterans stared at the Sisters with dirt-streaked faces and sunken eyes, saying nothing.

Behind these Veterans, Recruits in patched uniforms were scrambling between sandbags and Field Artillery. The stench of burnt flesh hung sour on the tongue.

The HDF Colonel at the head of the Veterans coughed once to draw back the Sisters' attention. His rank was clear on his uniform, relatively unmarred by the mud and chaos of the surrounding battle. The Colonel's eyes looked over Constance and the other Sisters.

"I am Colonel Warren. And your arrival is... unexpected. Are you here to offer your help in our fight?"

"We are not here to fight your war, Colonel," Constance replied. "We are responding to a distress call."

"Any distress call here would have come from a citizen of the Great Human Alliance, under the protection of the HDF," Warren replied. "You are not needed here."

"Following GHA procedure is your duty, Colonel. Not mine," Constance said. "My duty is to respond to calls for aid. Regardless of your feelings."

A heartbeat passed in silence. Then, a medic shouldered past with a satchel. A child peered from behind a stack of crates and flinched when a gun barked somewhere beyond the lines.

Warren's gaze did not waver, but as his soldiers watched the medic pass, he shook his head.

"I suppose there's no sense in chasing you off. Supplies are low, and rationing of food and medical supplies is getting to civilian morale," Warren said at last. His eyes flicked to the smoke on the horizon and then back. "The High Elves have been doing hit-and-run attacks on our supply lines for weeks now."

"We'll establish a sanctuary by your headquarters," Constance said, steel in her tone. "We can help the civilians nearby while looking into the initial distress call."

Warren inclined his head the smallest degree. A muscle in his jaw twitched. "As you will. You can ask around the civilians and see if any of them made it... but our operations remain classified and stay off the front lines. I don't want to deal with the fallout if you get yourselves hit by a shell."

Constance simply nodded, giving the signal for the rest of the Sisters to move out. In less than an hour, a medical tent was raised in the shadow of Field Artillery. Its white cloth is already smudged with ash; red markers are staked at the corners to keep the path clear. Its cots were unfolded, its lanterns swung in the breeze, and its water was already being rationed out.

Constance worked among the other Sisters, steadying Novices with her presence, setting bones and wrapping wounds when needed.

Her eyes returned to Warren whenever she had a breath to spare. His soldiers paced restlessly, their orders shifting too often. He spoke in low voices to lieutenants, closing datapads whenever a Sister drew near. Twice she caught him glancing at the same dark smear on the horizon, then back to the tent, clearly weighing something in his mind.

As dusk bled toward full darkness, the tent filled. A boy with a bandaged head blinked at the lantern glow. A Sister whispered a brief prayer over a wounded soldier.

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Fiona worked until sweat beaded her hairline, glancing at the artillery with every thunderclap, then back to Constance as if measuring her calm.

"Colonel Warren is watching us," Fiona said at the washbasin.

"I know," Constance replied. "Watch back."

"I've talked to a dozen of the citizens. None of them knew why the High Elves started attacking here or what Colonel Warren's objectives are," Fiona said, setting aside her tools as she cleaned them. "Some said that he seemed more interested in shelling out the High Elves than retaking the city."

"I've instructed Prudence to keep near the Colonel," Constance replied. "Offer help, ask questions. Keep him occupied."

"What are you going to do?" Fiona asked.

Constance looked to the horizon, where smoke stained the dusk light red.

"We are going to lead a strike team. Small enough that our absence won't be noticed; our answers lie with the trail scribes." She said.

"Warren won't tell us anything."

Fiona's mouth tightened. "Warren won't like this. We're risking some kind of diplomatic incident..."

"Warren doesn't have to know," Constance said with a smile. "I can keep him distracted. Get me a team, and we'll leave in thirty minutes."

Constance busied herself with work around the camp, cleaning tools until the time came. Quietly, she excused herself for a stroll and headed towards one of the more sparsely defended areas of the front line.

Constance moved to the edge of camp as night set in. As she approached the edge of the trench, two guards stepped forward, rifles up and feet set wide, more from habit than conviction.

"No one past the perimeter," one said, "Colonel's orders."

"I'm afraid it's a little late for that. Colonel Warren sent us out because one of your patrols ignored his orders and went to go scavenging." Constance answered without missing a step. "With his trusted officers tied up, he's sent us out to fetch them discreetly. So, kindly let us through before the entire camp finds out."

The guards exchanged uneasy glances, caught between orders and the calm certainty in her tone.

Then Fiona approached, hand resting on her sheathed blade. Behind her were three armed Vanguard Sisters.

"Colonel Warren told us to meet you past the trenches," Fiona said. "Is, uh, everything in order?"

Despite the Novice's hesitation, her presence was enough to get the Recruits to lower their arms and signal Constance and the others through.

"Warren will be furious if he finds out you lied," Fiona whispered.

"He's got bigger problems." Constance patted her on the shoulder. "We'll be back before he realises we're gone. You assembled a good team, Fiona. It should make this easy work."

Beyond the wire, ash lingered in the air, drying out the mouth. Several of the Vanguard Sisters pulled out their masks, trying to filter the air.

The distant cracks of artillery sounded out like thunder from the sky as Constance weaved through the shadows of broken walls and rubble.

The ruins rose ahead as a low black line against the red-stained sky. Somewhere nearby, a whisper had begged for help and expected none. Constance let the memory of those faces steady her stride.

Fiona and the others moved at her side in lockstep, with complete silence. With each explosion, Fiona gripped her rifle tightly, but she refused to fall behind her Superior.

As the trenches faded from view behind the ruins of the city, a new sound rose from the other side. Fiona tilted her head, turning her ear towards its source.

"Jetbikes," Constance said, pulling Fiona into cover from behind as pinpricks of light emerged on the horizon.

Fiona turned to Constance. "But we're not involved in this; they have no reason to..."

A cascade of shots echoed out through the street, followed by the movement, followed shortly by a blur of sleek shapes past the Sisters' heads as their riders flew low through the rubble.

"I'd love to explain that to them," Constance says, dragging Fiona behind her, "But I don't think they're in the mood to listen."

The hum of the jetbikes returned, and Fiona took the initiative, starting to run. She moved ahead of Constance, vaulting over a tangle of rebar and then darting into the shadow of a collapsed column.

Fiona ducked low as another volley echoed out from the mounted shardguns on the bikes. She turned to Constance, only to see the Superior moving from cover.

"Constance, what are you doing?" Fiona called out.

Before she could respond, Constance dove forward, just ahead, as the Jetbike Strikers shifted the momentum of their charge in their direction. Constance landed on a Sister with her weapon drawn, causing the tackled Sister's gun to discharge into the air, spraying shots into the distance as the Elves once more drove past.

"If we take out one of the Elves, then there's no hope of staying out of this fight." Constance said, taking the heavy rifle from her companion's hands. "We'll need to be smart about this..."

"But..." The disarmed Sister said, "We're under attack here."

"Constance is right," Fiona chipped in. "Our convent's duties specify that we are to avoid unnecessary conflict, which is not in the interest of preserving life. I'm just not sure how we can avoid it here."

"We'll need a distraction," Constance said, tapping her chin for a moment as she inspected the rifle, then turned to Fiona, pointing at the rope over the Novice's belt. "If we rig the gun to a rope, we might be able to lead them away."

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Fiona nodded and dutifully began untying her belt as Constance got to work. "The rest of you move quickly. Head straight three streets; we're not far from the signal's source. I will meet you there."

As the Sisters moved out, another volley of fire followed them. Constance didn't look back, focused on rigging things perfectly before laying a grenade by the weapon.

She whispered a silent prayer to the God-Queen as she tied the knot around it and slunk down low as she moved away from the crevice where the gun was hidden. The rope would be just long enough to keep her safe, but if the Elves spotted her, she would be an easy target.

She checked her Rangefinder; sure enough, the Jetbike Strikers were circling around. Constance held her breath as they flew toward her.

Then, she pulled the rope. The gunshots echoed out, and the Elves turned sharply. They laid down a suppressive volley as they approached, and one shot hit the grenade that she had laid there. The Elves scattered as the rubble collapsed around the hiding spot, covering the area in thick dust.

Constance kept her head down until she heard them pass. Then she hurried after where she had instructed her Sisters to go. There, Fiona and others were already searching, but all that remained appeared to be ruins. Checking her Rangefinder, it seemed they were close; almost precisely over the signal's source.

"Signal's close." Constance said, adjusting the dials with gloved fingers.

"It was," Fiona replied, shaking her head. "It looks like we didn't make it in time."

Constance stood for a moment; nothing remained there above waist height. The Rangefinder was still detecting some faint signs of transmission, but digging for hours through rubble to find a still-functioning transmitter wasn't going to do any good.

Constance looked silently at the ground and let out a long breath. There was enough rubble that it wouldn't even be likely that the bodies could be retrieved without specialised equipment.

Constance stood straight and bowed her head in silence. "May the God-Queen guide their souls through the darkness."

"The God-Queen redeems." A chorus echoed through assembled Vanguard Sisters and Fiona. Constance paused a moment longer, letting the silence linger a moment longer, before finally touching her comms device.

"Constance? By the God-Queen's mercy, Sister Prudence's voice echoed out over the comm. "I've been trying to reach you. Colonel Warren... he's figured out you're missing. He's going to strike your position. Make it look like an accident."

Fiona turned to Constance, horror in her eyes, as Constance looked over the horizon. Narrowing her eyes, she saw an HDF spotter giving the sign to fire.

"We need to get out of here!" She called, hurrying away as the faint whistling of shells came out over the horizon.

Fiona did not need to be told twice. The Vanguard Sisters followed suit, sprinting as the whistling grew louder.

An explosion rippled out behind them; Fiona turned just in time to grab Constance's outstretched hand and pull her around a corner as a cloud of dust tore through the air.

"Warren's firing on us," Fiona said, her voice quivering as she struggled to catch her breath.

Constance merely closed her eyes and squatted down as another explosion sounded out behind them. Fiona followed her lead, ducking her head low as shrapnel and dust flew around the corner.

"Keep low. It should keep the Elves away. Prudence said..."

Another shell forced her to pause.

"Warren needs this to look like an accident," Constance continued. "He won't act openly. We just need to get back alive."

The shells fell like rain for a full minute by Constance's best count, but eventually there was a lull.

"Let's head back," Constance said as she stood up. "We'll gather any civilians who want to evacuate and finish our delivery to the Tyre IV refugees... maybe we can salvage something out of this."

Fiona nodded solemnly and rose behind her, turning towards the street. The shells had obliterated everything still standing, leaving only craters and dust.

The Vanguard Sisters stood up with her; one of them clutched a broken arm, but thankfully all of them had made it. Constance moved towards her to inspect the injury when Fiona coughed behind her.

"Sister Superior," Fiona said, "... I think the shelling might have revealed something."

Constance turned; at the bottom of one of the craters, there was a glint of metal: a shelter. She checked her Rangefinder quickly, confirming the distress signal was coming from below.

Turning quickly, Constance slid down and began to dig. Fiona and another Sister joined her, slowly moving away the dirt until a door was revealed.

"Open up in the God-Queen's name!" Constance called down. "We're here to help you!"

She knocked on the hatch for minutes until at last it swung open.

"I can't believe someone came." A young man in a lab coat squinted at the light as he shielded his eyes.

"Stars above," an elderly woman said, cleaning the dust from her glasses. "Is that you, Constance?"

Constance rubbed a sleeve over her face, wiping away the dust as she lifted the glasses off of her face. She smiled wide. "We heard your call. How many?"

"Nine," the woman answered, voice hoarse. "Three wounded. We rationed air when the vents clogged. We thought... We thought no one would come."

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They descended into the darkness. Emergency lights pulsed a weak, sinister red. Consoles lay overturned; cables looped like dead snakes across the floor. The air stank of dust and burnt circuitry.

At the far end, shapes stirred. Faces smeared with dust, eyes blinking in painful relief. The trail scribes.

"What is this place?" Fiona asked, sweeping her light across a half-destroyed array whose cracked displays still flickered with stubborn blue.

The old trail scribe pointed to a console where fragments of star maps ghosted in and out.

"A research centre, or it was," she said. "Most of our work had been focused on a recently discovered wormhole in this system. If stabilised, it could serve as a stable connection along an old trade route with the Elven Empire... Unfortunately, the GHA passed the information onto Colonel Warren. He saw it as an opportunity for glory and territory..."

Constance let the map's pale light paint her hands. "He brought the Elves. Now, they're fighting to control it..."

The old scribe replied, "And it seems that Warren is happy to just wipe any trace of his mistake, along with us..."

"We'll get you out of here," Constance said, "But maybe Warren is right about the wormhole... If all it is going to be used for is to bring war and misery, then perhaps it is best forgotten."

Another scribe shook his head violently, dust falling from his tangled hair.

"We devoted years to this," he said. "Our purpose as trail scribes is to bring the universe closer together. To connect the galaxy. We can't just bury knowledge when it is no longer convenient."

"The only duty worth following," Constance said, "is to preserve the light of the Human spirit. To bring comfort and joy to this cold galaxy. If the GHA isn't ready to use this knowledge for the betterment of humanity, then it is best to leave it for the future. We must hope that our children will find it once more and be wiser than us."

There was silence as the trail scribes looked among themselves. Murmurs echoed through the group, despite their weakness. Still, they were silenced by the eldest scribe. "We will do as you say; just bring us some water."

Constance nodded, signalling the available Sisters to start assisting. None of the scribes had any serious injury, but all of them eagerly accepted whatever food and water they received.

Soon enough, they were going through the consoles, manually deleting what they could as Fiona and the Vanguard Sisters set charges in place. The scribes took what personal effects they could until at last everything was set in place.

As they emerged through the hatch again, the sound of battle echoed around them. Both HDF and Elven forces had flocked to the site of the bombardment. It sounded as though the Elves had pinned the Humans down a little bit away.

Constance heard the elderly trail scribe mutter a soft farewell as she emerged last from the research facility. Fiona guided her away to safety.

Constance heard the jetbikes hum overhead. She prepared to defend the civilians, but this time the Elves passed without incident.

"They're retreating," Fiona said. "I guess they've figured out that we're not trying to look for a fight."

"We don't have much time then..." Constance said, "Detonate the charges."

From the safety of the nearest buildings left standing, Constance listened as a muffled explosion was followed by a landslide as the crater collapsed deeper into the facility.

"It's over," Constance said softly.

"Come out with your hands up," Colonel Warren's voice echoed out over the ruins.

He was flanked on either side by Veterans with an APC behind him. Prudence was behind him but unarmed. Her hands were free, but it was not clear whether she was there willingly.

Fiona looked at Constance with a moment of hesitation, gripping her pistol, but Constance simply shook her head and holstered her gun, emerging slowly from the ruins.

"I should have known," Colonel Warren said, his face twisting as he saw the Sisters and trail scribes stepping out from the ruins behind Constance. "I suppose I'd hoped that you'd been stupid enough to get yourself hit by an artillery shell."

"You were aiming those shells at..." Fiona said, but she was silenced by a single backward glance from Constance.

"We were performing our duty," Constance said. "We've located the source of the distress call. They're under our protection, and we are prepared to go, along with any civilians who wish to evacuate."

Warren's gaze slid past her to the trail scribes clutching their satchels like lifelines. "They are GHA citizens, under our military protection. I will debrief them here and release them when I see fit."

"We are citizens of the GHA," the elderly scribe said. "But you have no right to keep us, unless you can prove that we've done something wrong..."

"Not by the letter of the law," Warren replied, drawing a pistol. "But this war. Pragmatic decisions are necessary; you should know this, Constance."

Constance stepped forward, placing herself in front of the pistol. Fiona and the other Vanguards followed, as even Prudence ran out to position herself by their side, standing firmly between the trail scribes and the soldiers.

"Perhaps, one or two missing people could be reported as an accident," Constance said. "But what about my entire crew disappearing without a trace?"

Colonel Warren showed no reaction as he raised his arm, commanding the Veterans behind him to prepare.

Constance watched as the rifles behind him raised slowly, hesitantly.

“How confident are you that not a single soldier behind you will ever breathe a word of this... because if word gets out that you ordered the deaths of Alliance citizens, along with an entire ship of Blessed Sisters,” Constance said. “You’d be lucky if the HDF stopped at tearing off your badges and leaving you in a cell.”

Colonel Warren eyed her through the sights of his pistol. “You’ll be dead by then.”

“Martyrdom is an honour,” Fiona said. “We do not fear death for a just cause.”

“I would prefer we and our civilians lived, however,” Constance corrected. “Put down your guns, and we can all walk away.”

The distant sounds of the battle still raging between the rest of the HDF forces and the High Elves echoed in the distance as the stand-off dragged on.

Then, one of the HDF Veterans lowered his gun. Colonel Warren turned back to see the rest of his personal guard had followed.

“You have a battle to win, Colonel. You had better get back to your duty,” Constance said softly. “Meanwhile, we have civilians to tend to.”

“Get out of my sight,” Warren said, turning back to the APC.

“You did well,” Constance said, turning to Fiona. “You will make an excellent Sister one day.”

“I think I’ve chosen the name I will take in the God-Queen’s service,” Fiona replied. “You said our first duty must be to joy. The name Felicity will be a good reminder.”